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# AROUND CINEMAS



LILLIAN GISH

# AROUND CINEMAS

BY

JAMES AGATE

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1946

All the world's a screen,  
And all the men and women merely shadows :  
They have their film-fans and their swimming pools ;  
And one man shoves the stars through'out their parts  
Lest they should act like stooges.

*With Apologies*

*First Published 1946*

TO  
CAROLINE LEJEUNE  
AND  
DILYS POWELL

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE FIRST THREE ARTICLES in this book appeared in the old "Saturday Review." The articles entitled "Bergner on the Screen," "To Film or Not to Film," "Bergner as Rosalind," and "'Cyrano' in English," appeared in "John o' London's Weekly." The others are culled from the "Tatler." My thanks are due to the proprietors concerned for their courteous permission to reprint. Also to Mr Alan Dent for his kindness in reading the proofs and making the Index.

## NOTE

SIR MAX BEERBOHM begins "Around Theatres" with the words : " My entry into dramatic criticism was informal—nay, was grossly irregular." But I doubt whether it was quite so irregular as my entry into film criticism. The way this came about is as follows : Some twenty years ago I conceived the notion of becoming a film as well as a dramatic critic, oddly imagining that any prospective editor would require proof of my qualifications, a notion which subsequent observation has dispelled. Wherefore I cast about for some way of getting a film article into print, and presently devised the plan of exchanging duties for one week with the film critic of "Eve," for which paper I "did" the theatre. The lady agreed, the acting editor raised no objection, and the article duly appeared. Armed with this I applied for the vacant post of film critic to the "Tatler." My suit was successful. May I say that the wheel came full circle with the most pleasurable felicity ? Reggie Hooper, my chief on "Eve," became my chief on the "Tatler," and I seize the opportunity to pay tribute to those qualities of kindness, judgment, and sense of co-operation which did not change in twenty years.

My first article in the "Tatler" appeared on September 19, 1928. It was not, strictly speaking, the first I had ever written about the cinema, since in 1921 I contributed to the old "Saturday Review" an essay on Charlie Chaplin entitled "Hey, but He's Doleful !" To the best of my knowledge this essay was English journalism's first step towards a critical approach to the film. I took the first half of the step in writing the article ; Filson Young took the other half in printing it. Two more film articles in the "Saturday," and then I left the march of serious criticism to others. I have written lightly for a public which reads me only, I am persuaded, when it is being shaved or waved. In his first article in the "Saturday," Max wrote : "I can imagine that a man who had never been to a theatre might, were he suddenly sent forth as a dramatic critic, be able to write really charming and surprising and instructive things about the stage." Similarly I have imagined that a man who spends his life in theatres might, were he to sally forth as a film critic, find things to say not wholly charmless, expected and uninstructed. Alan Dent hit the nail on the head in a letter : " If you must weigh yourself against the whole pack of film critics, I must in all fairness and coolness of judgment allow that the first six to enter my mind—the Women of

Sunday (Dilys and Miss Lejeune), "The Times" boys (Cookman and Dudley Carew), and at least two of the dailies (Richard Winnington for mordant, canine wit, and Elspeth Grant for the feline sort)—are vastly more *au fait* with films and film-making than you normally even pretend to be." But I do not pretend anything ; I do not weigh myself in any balance against anybody. My attitude has been that of a man of normal education who, in the course of an idle saunter and brought up against gold braid, has had the Wemmick-like thought : " Hullo ! Here's a cinema ! Let's drop in ! " This book is not intended to be documentary, educational, didactic, comprehensive. It sets forth no aesthetic theory of the film. It is in no sense a history. It is nowhere technical. Of the mechanics of picture-making I know, and desire to know, nothing. I should hate to learn the meaning of "montage." I hold that Pope never wrote a truer line than

For not to know some trifles is a praise.

The principle on which I have chosen my little essays ? Not according to the importance of their subject-matter, but according to my liking for what I have written. (A painter may prefer his "Pub in Shoreditch" to his "Fleet Street View of St Paul's.") For half of the period under consideration the film industry used the word "producer" in the theatrical sense, meaning the fussy fellow, the promoted stage-manager who tells the actors what to do. And then, some ten or a dozen years ago, the film jargoneers decided that "producer" should mean the sponsoring company, and that the man who posed the film stars, told them when to stare at the camera and when not, and what the words mean, should be called the "director." Throughout this book the words "producer" and "director" are used interchangeably, but always indicating the person responsible for the picture's meaning, if any. Readers may note that the appellations "Mr" and "Miss," used at the beginning, disappear towards the end. There is a fashion in these things, and I think that to-day's fashion is right. Glance, reader, at my frontispiece. Am I to put "Miss Gish" beneath that ? A thousand times no ! Dear, dear Lillian !

I find that in the course of over twenty years I have called too many films "the finest I have ever seen." I must have thought so at the time. It appears that the names of films, plays, and books are sometimes printed in italics and sometimes between inverted commas. *Tant pis !* Uniformity was never the spice of life.

J. A.

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# 1. Hey, but He's Doleful!

October 1, 1921.

IF YOU DID NOT REFLECT you might say that Covent Garden, when it opened its arms to Charlie Chaplin, underwent a reverse. The haunt of beaux quizzing a Bride of Lammermoor virginal at fifty summers, of belles deliciously *pâmées* before some Italian Puss-in-Boots masquerading as Edgardo—surely the old Opera House suffered a come-down when for these sublimities were substituted a pair of middling boxers and their attendant “fans.” And now must the great building bemean itself still farther, and drink of the very dregs of disgrace, the silent buffoonery of the billycock and cane. The last indignity this; more, you might plead, than these old bricks and mortar should be asked to endure. I do not agree. I am to comfort the old house, to bid it take heart again. I declare with the utmost seriousness that in the thumpings of Messrs Beckett and McCormick I find a deeper note of conviction than ever I do in the roulades of bewigged and beringleted puppets. I declare that in the acting of this film comedian I find sincerity great as any bruiser's and a mastery of trag-i-comedy unknown to the operatic stage. I except the Russians, who have nothing to do with the Garden. Almost am I persuaded to divert the trickle of my theme, which is Charlie Chaplin, into the more general stream of “The Opera Revisited” or “Grandeur and Decadence Reversed.” The title, “Sed Revocare Gradum,” were nicely to hand. What jollier than a hymn to the ridiculous turned sublime? Charlie is my more immediate darling, however, and I will stick to my text.

Charlie Chaplin sublime? This is some writer's trick, say you—you are in argumentative mood this week, dear reader—some literary flourish. I assure you that it is not, that there is, at least for me, more emotion in a single tear of *The Kid* than in all the bucketsful of “Vesta la giubba.” “But,” you reply, “what nonsense have we here? All the world knows that Charlie Chaplin is a clown.” But there are clowns and clowns just as there is laughter and laughter. Here let me promise that I have no intention of following the comic spirit into Meredithian or Bergsonian fastnesses. I know a funny fellow without the help of your greybeards. A funny fellow is he who makes me laugh, willy-nilly, without dis-

coverable reason. So that great moon-calf, Grock. So Mr Fred Kitchen. So any of your essential drolls. But not so Charlie. At him I laugh for reasons which I know instinctively to be eminently discoverable. The first glimpse of that little shuffling gnome sets all my critical faculties stirring; I want to probe and dissect, to analyse, to trace that humour to the source I know it must ultimately reveal. I am on my critical guard. Whereas the other side to the actor's genius, his immense and confounding pathos, finds me utterly defenceless. Let that lip droop for an instant and the Nile is here. I care not whence it comes.

Place must be found for a short dissertation upon the sense of humour, lest I be deemed as bereft thereof as was Eliza's husband. For I do not look to join the agelastic choir—Mr Dombey and the author of the "Hymn of Hate," Mrs Humphry Ward, Mr Drinkwater's "Abraham Lincoln"—who had surely by our little clown been unamused. I doubt whether he had been commanded to Victorian Windsor; Mr Gladstone had certainly turned him into a sermon. Humour is a kittle thing. Let me, when I would laugh royally, have comedians about me that are fat. I am for Falstaff and Bully Bottom, Micawber and Herbert Campbell. I adore the rotundity of Potash but I cope less easily with Perlmutter. I worship the little butter-pat which is Jeff; Mutt is apt to become an intellectual strain. I repeat that when I hold my sides, I do not want to know why. There is, alas! a kind of fellow much about these days who insists upon always knowing why, and in his nosings leads our wittiest by that organ. Mr Walkley is the latest sufferer from what I will call Crocitis, with Bergsonian relapses. Does he not tell us that Mr Robey, as a Venetian minstrel with a stuffed monkey pinned to his coat-tails, exemplifies the dictum that the secret of the comic is "something mechanical encrusted upon the living"? The awful figure of Professor Bergson must here have come between Mr Walkley and the stage, else had he told us that in this scene Mr Robey was less funny than in the others. And now I suppose I shall be told that the famous boots and trousers are mechanical encrustations upon the living Charlie. Rubbish. To the percipient they are barnacles, retardative of a swifter wit. The secret of this clowning is that it is ever so much more than trouser-deep. I do not laugh when my intellectual interests are aroused. I do not laugh when Bouvard ridiculously rushes to Pécuchet in his Government office to announce on the first day of spring "J'ai ôté ma flanelle!" I hardly laugh when, in the French play, the retired grocer, whose daughter is to marry a lawyer, erects in his back garden a statue to Cicero

for the purpose of hurling it at the apostrophe : "Cicéron, tu ne vaux pas mon gendre ! " I do not laugh at Charlie till I cry. I laugh lest I cry, which is a very different matter. And therefore I bid Covent Garden lift up its heart and say with me : " Caruso, tu ne vaux pas mon Charlot ! "

It is not denied that there is a natural fun about Charlie which is not subject to reason ; that his moustache, like the eyebrows of Mr Robey or the head-gear of Mr Churchill, approaches the border-line which divides the higher genius of man from the lesser works of God. There is in his transmutation of bedspread into dressing-gown a comicality which is one with the comic spirit and indivisible. Since both are invested with "constellatory importance," kinship is attained with the laughter of the spheres. The more I cast about for the why and wherefore of this absolute thing, this humour which is a part of Original Creation, lent to Charlie at birth, now worn by him as a mantle, the more I am teased out of thought. I am content to laugh and hold my unthinking sides. There are aspects, however, about which we may legitimately reason. There is the quality of logic. In *Shoulder Arms* the duckings in the flooded dug-out are not simply lunatic. The fellow puts his head under water because the pillow upon which he would lay it is submerged. He would blow out his candle, afloat on the water and unmoored, and his puffs direct it whither we have all along foreseen it must go, under the toes of the neighbouring bed-fellow. In another film you see him with a mongrel and endeavouring to enter a drinking saloon where dogs are not admitted. Charlie is in no way nonplussed ; he envelops the tyke in his expansive trousers. But the tail emerging through a preposterous hole, and its owner's owner taking his drink cheek by jowl with the big drum of the saloon orchestra, Heaven and earth—and more particularly earth—are aroused with resonant, persistent, and disastrous thump. Euclidean, this. Even more important is the close-tangled relation between humour and pathos. Forlornly this desolate oldier nibbles the cheese out of the mouse-trap because of all the company he alone has received no parcel from home. Jealously he reads over the shoulders of his companions the letters which he, poor fellow, has been denied. His interest in their contents is *personal*, and the poignancy of that wry smile and the childlike eyes welling with a child's disappointment is such as the articulate comedian, with all his mumblings and mouthings, had hardly achieved. When, sharing his "kip" with the Kid, he rolls over and takes with him all the covering, he does but intensify the care with which he had tucked the little mite in. In the

agony of his search for the little fellow, he must needs look between mattress and bed-board. Charlie cannot embark upon high entertainment without grotesque misadventure. In gallant rescue he will descend a chimney, only to burn his buttocks. But it is equally true that the most grotesque of his hazards is fraught with moral significance. Even in the ridiculous fight with the giant bully we feel that just as Mr Polly screwed himself up to the prospect of self-immolation, so, at a pinch, will Charlie face and fight and dare if his mother-wit fail to shuffle him a way round ; that, all alternatives lacking, he will go through hell for the Kid. And it is convenient for the cinema-goer that hell is so easily translatable into scrambles over perilous roofs.

I know nothing of the soul of this actor. I do know that his most warped and twisted caricatures still retain some soul of humanity. Let me reproduce an incident which exactly illustrates what I have always felt about Charlie Chaplin. The scene was a Lancashire town, the characters a mob of rough youths joking and larking. They blocked the pavement. One saw approaching a stunted, misshapen figure of deformity. With dread, one waited for the jeers with which it seemed the hunchback must be received. Suddenly a youth cried out : " Hey up ; a chap ! " and the cripple was given silent and respectful passage. Charlie, despite his oddities, is still " a chap." He belongs to humanity ; he is one of us. His queer sorrows, his queerer scrapes might well be ours. To meet his woes he arms his wistful soul, even as we do. He is too small for big battles ; the *toga virilis* sits not well upon him. Indeed, it is not assumed. For when, at the end of the play, the Kid is received into sheltering arms and Charlie is received too, we know which of the twain stands in the greater need of succour. *The Kid* is the best film Chaplin has made, and it looks as though he may be on the point of realising which way his finer genius lies. Happy the artist who, with his buffoonery and his pot-boiling days behind him, is at liberty to give us the best of his art. I know that many people look upon Charlie Chaplin as a figure frolicsome and free. " Hey, but he's doleful ! " seems to me the more fitting note, and the one I think this little clown will strike in the future. I see him at this juncture as Sir Joshua saw Garrick, a figure torn between rival mistresses, endeared to the softer, a shade apprehensive of the sterner Muse.

## 2. *Love and War*

*August 19, 1922.*

"THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE," the new film at the Palace Theatre, taken in conjunction with some recent multipopulous films, suggests that this vast industry has at last found its artistic feet. Just as the motor-car designer got away from the idea of the horse and discovered the shape of a mechanically propelled vehicle to be implicit in its motive power, so the latest film producers are finding that pantomime and a flat projection had given them a medium independent of, and insubservient to, the theatre. It was recognised from the first that if the screen was to be an art at all it must do other than hold the camera up to a stageful of actors ; the difficulty was to discover the essential difference. The "cow-boy" films had not got beyond pointing the lens at the circus, whilst those grandiose sentimentalities, degenerate dramas of the fatty heart, pantographic enlargements of the comedies of Tom Robertson, were obviously not more than the old obsession of the theatre. But with the enormous growth of popularity and the use of the largest halls came the feeling that the medium was capable of wider scope than the elaboration of Johnnie's little passion for Jenny.

When Reinhardt, in *The Miracle*, sent his company of nuns up-stage as though he were flushing a covey of white-winged birds, he did more than increase the effectiveness obtained by a single figure ; he translated emotion from the particular into the general. When one first read of these "super-films," how *Intolerance* had cost a million dollars—or was it pounds?—how the "set" for the chariot races in *The Queen of Sheba* covered one hundred and fifty acres, how a single scene of *Theodora* contained fourteen thousand actors—frankly, one was inclined to scoff. This, one thought, could be but producer's vulgarity, the old desire to startle the universe and catch its pence. Then when one saw the films, one realised that behind the ostentation lay more than a display of numbers. It was Reinhardt's idea all over again, the conferring of unity upon a crowd, the transformation of a rabble into an entity. Of course so big a thing as this was not to be achieved at once, nor without mistakes. The story of *Theodora*, for example, was uncommonly like the novelette

of the kitchen-maid afflicted with sentimental elephantiasis ; the fourteen thousand characters were too small individually, and so not more impressive than the little people who stroll about at the foot of an architect's elevation. The theme of *The Queen of Sheba* was that of an overgrown feuilleton with an amorous Solomon for hero. Here again the crowd, at rest, was not more significant than a photograph of Mr Henry Ford's workpeople during the dinner-hour. In action, as, for instance, when it leaped the arena walls and swarmed at the heels of the scudding chariots, it took on a quality which no crowd in the theatre can give, yet which remained decorative and not more than decorative. But in that great film, *Intolerance*, the armies of Cyrus and Belshazzar swept the screen not only with the purely embellishing quality of the passage-work in the overtures to "Oberon" and "Euryanthe," but also with something of the fateful implications of the Fifth Symphony. Very cleverly the Beethoven was the music chosen to accompany these scenes of surging, almost tidal emotion.

So far I cannot claim that the innovation was really more than spectacular. No stage-manager, however clever, can convey a mass emotion to which the audience cannot, in the nature of things, be susceptible. Belshazzar and Cyrus lived too long ago for us to take sides. Whereas the emotion of *The Four Horsemen* is very recent, almost too recent for artistic purposes. One of the sub-titles suggested very tactfully that *there*, in that *other* country, soldiers were arming in the full conviction and consciousness of right. The fact remains, however, that I should not invite a German guest to witness this film. It sears the mind with old memories that were better forgotten, and reopens old wounds that were better healed. Probably this is unavoidable. You cannot stir up national emotion—and I claim that the film achieves this purely by its treatment of crowds—and take only the gilt-edged, sentimental prettinesses. I do not want to write too loosely or impracticably of this "mass emotion." Obviously it cannot meander about unshackled, magnoperating in the void. It must be harnessed to some kind of story. This, in *The Four Horsemen*, is just a trifle mechanical. The invention of an old rancher of the Argentine, whose two daughters marry, one a Frenchman and the other a German, is an unnecessarily elaborate device for getting the two races into the most intimate of all conflicts. It was managed much more simply in *Les Oberle* and *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* ; but it may be that the producers were not aiming at economy. And perhaps there was no reason why they should so aim ; there is virtue in extravagance as well as in cheese-paring. The

story, as it is told up to the outbreak of the war, is good, unsubtle yet not vulgar. As soon, however, as the drum-taps speak, we know that we are listening to a grander and more poignant language.

I felt curiously divided on this matter of a personal core to a world upheaval. At times it seemed absurdly trivial; at other times one reflected that people do not, actually, visualise events in the mass, but only through the medium of their personal outlook. I have already said that the story is not vulgar; I want to say now that it is of common application. This tale of a Francesca married to a Malatesta whom she does not love, and enamoured of a Paolo, this fable of a conflict between duty to a stricken husband and an eager passion, is as old as the hills and has never known solution. But war, too, is old and has that same element of conflicting right. You take away all dignity from those years if you deny the German breast the same flame as that which animated the French. I do not know of any film in which the actual and the symbolical have been better interwoven. To bring those four tremendous figures—Conquest, War, Famine, and Death—upon the screen and not approach silliness was in itself a triumph, whilst the implications of the last few moments required and obtained very delicate handling. Sometimes in a big picture the smallest things are the most effective. A French flag borne by a peasant in pitiful defence of his village caught me by the throat.

### 3. Some Films and a Moving Picture

September 30, 1922.

RECENTLY I WROTE about the "mass emotion" of the multipopulous film, and suggested that the screen was finding its artistic feet. It has not been long in losing them again. In *Nero*, at the Philharmonic Hall, I find no trace of emotion except that which one had thought safely buried with Wilson Barrett. The film is our old friend, *The Sign of the Cross*, all over again. History repeating itself, a matinée is to be given for the benefit of the clergy, but not, presumably, to the ultimate loss of the management. Doubtless it is hoped that some bishop will preach about this film, some rural dean give forth ruridecanal encomiums. Alas, for the purposes of boosting, that Mr Gladstone is not alive! Under the

cloak of religion *Nero* makes considerable display of sensuality. How, it may be objected, can a writer give virtue its proper meed unless he shows vice in its brightest colours? (Sir Hall Caine used constantly to find himself in this convenient difficulty.) And therefore while the Christian heroine is of a flickering innocence bordering on the imbecile, the Pagans must perambulate Rome with the frenzy of stags in the rutting season, their eyeballs bursting from their sockets. The story, says the programme, "agrees with the account of Nero's life as related by," among others, Suetonius! This is like saying that "Little Arthur's" ingenuous account of our own Edward the Second tallies with Malowé. Nero is a case for Krafft-Ebing, and not for the scenario-monger. He is not a proper hero for the screen. Personally, I should have no objection to an exact portrait of the pervert and the madman, which also included the pupil of Seneca and the Emperor; I dislike the compromise which is false equally to virtue as to vice. The French actor, Gretillat, gives the torso and the jowl cleverly enough; de Max would have added the brains, the effeminacy, and the descent from Augustus. But the whole atmosphere suggests, not the decadence which was Rome, but the tawdriness which is the modern Palais de Danse—an Eternal City too obviously run up in a day.

Why, I wonder, must all screen heroines be feeble-minded? The heroine of *The Game of Life* at the West End Cinema is blind from birth, and believes that everybody else is blind too. Her world is one in which a man must touch a thing before he can know it, and if he would speak of an elephant, must first produce one. A student of Braille, she does not know the word "sight," and is confounded when some careless fellow says that he can see the stars. "What is 'see'?" she lisps. *Smilin' Through*, at the Marble Arch Pavilion, is feeble, pretentious, and lachrymose. A bride who has been shot by a jealous lover during the wedding ceremony—which the producer places in the back garden—spends the next fifty years "on the other side," hovering about in her bridal gown. When her spirit is not hovering, it is reincarnated in a flesh-and-blood niece, her sister's child. The sister "goes over" later on, and the two indulge in sentimental colloquy. Watching this rubbish, I thought regretfully of that play of Mr Laurence Housman in which a Victorian lady wires from earth to a sister who has preceded her to a distinctly anthropomorphic Heaven: "Railway accident. Arriving 4.30." "I expected you earlier," says the elder lady, looking at the clock and pecking her sister's cheek. "The train was late," replies the younger woman simply. Oh, for just one little breath of Mr Housman's

irony, or even of his common sense, to blow away these screen absurdities! "Does irony go out with life?" asks Lamb. Alas! that it goes out or ever we enter the grave, as soon indeed as we set foot in the cinema! Miss Norma Talmadge dies from a gunshot wound with less show of emotion than one of Messrs Lyons's waitresses exhibits on receiving an order for a cup of tea. According to the programme, this actress "reveals a spiritual power that goes far beyond acting." This is nonsense.

It was pleasant, after this, to sit in quiet enjoyment, at the Stoll Picture Theatre, Kingsway, of some unpretentious domestic pieces, including *General John Regan*, with Mr Milton Rosmer. The previous week I had seen at this well-appointed and comfortable theatre a magnificent picture of rival pirate gangs cutting each other's throats in a sunken submarine. This was a fine example of the proper function of the screen, which is to supplement, not supplant, the theatre, and to show aspects of life and drama that defy Drury Lane. "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!" should be inscribed over all shadowy portals. Cataracts and hurricanes are the thing here, with incident piled on incident. Let the film actor leave that little affair of psychology to the Duses who, I dare swear, would make a poor show of their minds' insides at fathom five or thereabout.

"Stroheim is no more to be shunned as a contribution to art than Hogarth's 'Rake's Progress,' Balzac's 'Comédie Humaine,' Dante's 'Inferno,' or Ibsen's 'Ghosts.' " *C'est gigantesque!* as Flaubert used to say of some bourgeois enormity. The moral of *Foolish Wives*, which is "Written, Directed by and Featuring Stroheim"—what a lot these "literary" producers are!—is that wealthy American ladies should not, whilst at Monte Carlo, pay midnight visits to Russian Counts living at the top of high towers unprovided with fire escapes, whose jealous maid-servants are waiting to destroy them with petrol. I have no objection to the screen being didactic; it had better be that than psychological. Remarking elsewhere the close attention which the audience gave to a performance, between two pictures, of the middle and last movements of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, I observed to a companion that the piece was probably new to them. "Not only the piece," answered my friend, "it's the first time they've ever heard the fiddle!" Metaphorically there was truth in this. Dotted about the house there may be a Cabinet Minister or two, but collectively the cinema audience is, in the matter of aesthetic, totally uneducated. They gape before the screen to-day as the thirteenth-century playgoer gaped at the morality play. But *Foolish Wives* is a poor morality. A woman who visits a chance

acquaintance at midnight with 90,000 francs loose in her pocket is, if she be innocent-minded, too big a fool to be worth our while. Or say she is worth the police-court missionary's while and not Balzac's. An American Valéric Marneffe would be an addition to the "Human Comedy," but not this ninny. Stroheim is a Vautrin as Miss Corelli might have conceived him. This film is really a highly amusing masque, the incidents are exciting, the photography is first-class. Stroheim himself is a fine actor, the personification of Junkerdom, the Prussian *pur sang*, and no Slav. "A man you will love to hate," runs the announcement, with an eye to the little scullery-maid. For myself I should hate not to love Stroheim; he is so well acted. The film has been cut stupidly. This Don Juan worthy of Hogarth, Balzac, Dante, Ibsen—and why not Byron, Baudelaire, and Mr Gilbert Frankau?—is bundled into a sewer in less time than a competent actor can say "A rat!" Whereas the impersonation has been powerful enough for me to want to read a sub-title which shall proclaim:

And now I'll do't: and so he goes to . . . hell!

The music, under the direction of Mr Basil Cameron, is the best I have ever heard at a picture show.

Last, I saw *Broken Blossoms*, at the really luxurious Victory Cinema in Theobald's Road, and found this little picture as arresting as ever. I know of no other in which so much "screen beauty" is attained. This is, I think, attributable to the Whistlerian fogs and shadows of the setting, and that dock in Limehouse ever recurring like some pedal point. I once read an Eastern poem of but a single line—"Oh, these wistaria flowers!" Some of that same ache is in the acting of the Chinese boy. The performance of little Lillian Gish still seems to me surpassingly true and moving. She puts into her scenes of terror as much power and pathos as Sarah ever put into *Tosca*, and I think that, if I were to hear the child's cries, she would move me more. As it is, the film scene is the more nearly unbearable. I do not say that this little girl is as great an actress as Sarah. For all I know she may not be able to speak the President's American. What I do know is that in this one picture she ranks with the world's great artists. It is curious that, when she wears her hair down the sides of her pinched, woebegone little face, with all the expressiveness of that wistful countenance drawn from the eyes down the long suspense of the nose to come to final meaning in the trembling mouth—it is curious that this plain little American child should give the world an exact image of the great actress in her far-off youth.

## 4. *Film Criticism*

September 26, 1928

THAT AUTHORITATIVE CRITIC, William Archer—for nobody could be so unamusing without being authoritative—once wrote that “A critic of sculpture, of painting, of music, of poetry”—and he might have added drama—“can have ever before him the masterpieces from which his critical canons are generalised. He can go to work both inductively and deductively. He evolves from his inner consciousness the idea of what art *should* be ; he looks backward through the centuries and learns what art *has* been ; and a compromise between the two gives him his standard of what art *can* be under existing conditions. It is his own fault if his opinions remain unsystematised, mere impressions of the moment.” Apply this to film criticism and you must see how difficult it is for this new branch of the critical art to be other than the unsystematised impression of the moment. Consider me. Having looked up in the dictionary the exact meanings of “inductively” and “deductively,” I feel that I can go to work in the manner indicated ; and I hope I have an inner consciousness from which to evolve the idea of what film art should be. So far so good. But now comes the snag, the looking backward through the centuries to learn what film art has been. “No birds were flying in the sky,” wrote Lewis Carroll, giving a conclusive reason for the feathered delinquency. Just as there were no birds to fly, so film art has no more than a handful of years behind it, amounting to a good deal less than half of one of those centuries through which the critic is supposed to peer. Perhaps only a quarter of a century.

My first encounter with a motor car took place during the first week-end I was allowed to spend away from home. It was at Windermere, at the corner of a country lane, and I remember to this day the unexpected toot, the lumbering ironmongery, the hideous stench. It was about the same time that I saw my first film—a delicious, flickering, wild and woolly absurdity. At a guess I should say thirty years ago. Leaving these memories, let me discover another difficulty besides that of the time factor. However eagerly the film critic may scan the twenty, thirty, forty years of film progress, he cannot learn what film art has

been, for the reason that there hasn't been any. Perhaps that is putting it too rhetorically. There has been *some* film art, but in comparison with the bulk of intolerable stuff produced it is less than Falstaff's ha'penny-worth of bread to his intolerable deal of sack. The reason for this? The reason is because film art, with comparatively few exceptions, has been in the hands not of the film artist but of the film manufacturer. And that, you know, is quite another proposition.

Now it has occurred to me as a result of a whole week's arduous thinking that there is too big a gulf between film art and film manufacture. Resolved though I am that one should draw no parallel between theatre and film, the older art may yet teach us lessons which it would be foolish to ignore. The theatre gives us the drama of Tchchov, an admirable theatre for the over-educated. It gives us the theatre of the Surrey side, an admirable theatre for those who are not educated at all. But there is a theatre in between, the theatre, to put it briefly, of Pinero. In the world of the cinema the equivalent of *The Cherry Orchard* is *Warning Shadows*, and the equivalent of Surrey-side melodrama is the picture of that same turgid imbecility which appears indifferently as *Torrid Virgins* or *Frozen Wives*. But there is an immense public which demands something midway between these two extremes. By this I do not mean drawing-room tragedy of the Pinero order. The plays I mean may deal with Samarkand or Surbiton, New Guinea or New Caledonia. They may centre in a cyclone or a sewing-machine. Their heroines may wear nothing but modesty and beads, or Molynoux' latest creation. These pictures may, in fact, deal with any subject from devil-dancing to pyjama parties.

It is to cope with this, the majority of pictures, that the film critic must formulate his rules. My week's thinking has left a residuum of two, and two only. At one time I thought that the first rule must be that pictures should be a credible imitation of life. But I rejected this on reflection that some of the best pictures have been the delirious projection of something absurdly unlike life. So I had to go back farther still, and what I found was this. Rule 1—all pictures must be about exciting things. Rule 2—the spectator must know what those exciting things are about. Does the reader think I have forgotten pictorial values? Not at all. But I put plain meaning first.

Apply this to *The Spy*, Fritz Lang's production at the Marble Arch Pavilion. This film moves at an enormous speed and is immensely exciting. It demands and gets from us what the severer art has called "the willing suspension of belief." In other words, we are prepared to

let credibility go hang. Is it feasible that the British or any other Secret Service should employ as its trusted agent a man who is (a) a great banker ; (b) a Grock-like music-hall performer ; and (c), a world bandit warring against society ? The answer is that the world would be jollier if such things were feasible. But to let the truth go hang and not get the hang of the truth are horses of different colours. And, frankly, much of the plot took me out of my depth. A lot of the film was quite first-class. The sending to their death of the three Japanese envoys was dramatic largely because it was self-explanatory. To see a Japanese plenipotentiary commit *hara-kiri* because a beautiful Russian spy had stolen the plans of a treaty while he slept, was thrilling. It was thrilling because one knew what beautiful spies and plain plenipotentiaries and treaties and *hara-kiri* are. But it was less thrilling to see Hagh's Bank bombed, because one didn't know who the bombers were and why they bombed. It was less thrilling to see the train carrying the beloved run into the train carrying the belover, because one couldn't make out whither, and on what errand, both were travelling. Perhaps this scene would have been better with sound effects. Why, when producers arrange that you shall hear a pin drop, do they stage a railway crash as soundless as jelly colliding with blancmange ? Towards the end of the picture I began to feel that I had lost the plot. Or shall I say that it was rather like finishing an Edgar Wallace novel and discovering that it wasn't the one you started with ? But perhaps I am just being stupid. My apprenticeship to these complications is young, and the film, to me, is still a night school. With the reservation that the simple may have difficulty in grasping the whole of it, *The Spy* is an admirable entertainment.

## 5. *The First Talkie*

October 10, 1928.

THERE WAS ALTOGETHER too much cry and too little wool about the vitaphone performance at the Piccadilly Theatre. Those things which were solved were not problems, and no solution was offered of the one and only problem which was of real interest to the cinema-goer. I shall deal separately with each half of this statement. We all knew before we

went to the Piccadilly that the problem of synchronisation had been solved. The cinema-goer cares nothing at all whether synchronisation is done by boring holes in a disc or cutting slits in a ribbon, and the vitaphone could do no more than other machines. I shall not criticise in detail the variety programme submitted by Messrs Warner Brothers, for the reason that half of it was worthless as variety entertainment and merely elucidatory of what we could surmise for ourselves—that the banjo can be synchronised as well as the human voice. But the other half of the variety programme, the half which contained the two orchestral items and the operatic singing, clamours for comment. It was indeed most significant.

No reasonable person could have expected Messrs Warner Brothers to refrain from showing close-ups of the orchestra during its performance of the *Tannhäuser* Overture. One recalls in this connection Dr Johnson's comparison between female preaching and a dog walking on its hind legs : "It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all." Messrs Warner Brothers have not asked themselves whether serious concert-goers habitually provide themselves with telescopes and field-glasses, or whether the sight of some pimply Teuton blowing through wreathed moustaches his wreathed horn will bring the castle of Venus nearer to the mind's eye or remove it altogether.

The point these acute brothers have seized is that this close-up can be done, and done well ; whether the doing is worth while is completely not their point. No film producer, given the mentality of his class, could have been expected to refrain. Hand a child a box of matches, and he is going to set fire to something without caring what it is that he burns. The sound-recording film is a new toy in the hands of a class whose mentality is at once astute and childlike ; such mistakes are bound to be made and will be rectified. Curiously enough, the next item showed the virtue of what had been an obvious defect. Readers of the "*Tatler*" will remember how little the jazz conductor, presenting a jazz band in the flesh, is content to rely upon the ear alone, how he is to be found tricking out his players and their instruments with every conceivable form of glitter and spangle, and even bathing them in multi-coloured lights ranging from bilious apricot to sea-sick peach. One has even seen dancers deployed in the foreground, and moving scenery displayed in the background. This for the reason that the jazz conductor recognises that jazz music is in itself insufficient. Therefore the sound-film producer does well to show us close-ups of his performers, since to that music the hang-dog, lack-lustre vacancy of the players' expressions

is the fitting and expected accompaniment. If a minor criticism be permitted, let me suggest that Messrs Warner Brothers have been careless in one detail. It was, I submit, silly to project a double-bass player and then drown him with three saxophone fiends, so that no sound of all that Gargantuan sawing and plucking at a ten-foot instrument reached our ears.

As for Signor Martinelli's excerpt from *Pagliacci*, I have nothing but the utmost praise. This seems to me to solve the difficulties of opera in this country. There is now no reason why Middlesbrough, Peebles, and Rochdale should not, if they want them, have their performances of *The Ring*. Visually operas performed in this way will be very nearly as good as, and sometimes better than, the real thing. The last time I heard *Salomé* at Covent Garden I paid eighteen shillings for a seat in the gallery from which I could not see one-fourth of the stage, whereas at the Piccadilly Theatre I saw the whole of Signor Martinelli. Here let me suggest that the performance on the vitaphone was better than any flesh-and-blood performance which any small town is ever likely to get—if indeed it gets any operatic performance at all. Here also is the place to say that as accompaniment to the silent picture the vitaphone, while immeasurably inferior to orchestras such as those at the Tivoli, the Marble Arch Pavilion, and the best provincial houses, is certainly a great deal better than the small, inefficient picture-palace band.

I come now to the problem which the performance at the Piccadilly Theatre made no attempt to tackle. That problem, put simply, is this : Will the talkies increase or decrease the spectator's illusion that he is looking at life ? The theatre has imposed upon us, and we have agreed to accept, a number of conventions as the result of which the spectator in the theatre appears to be looking at life through a fourth wall. Up to now the conventions of the cinema have asked us to believe that we have been looking at life through a glass and sound-proof window. Will the percolation of sound through that window increase or decrease illusion ? (The critic of *The Times* raises the objection that the audience "becomes strangely aware of the interposition of two mediums between ourselves and the actor ; we neither see nor hear him, but he is reproduced for us twice over.") But that objection will, I feel, pass ; we shall agree to the convention of the voice coming from beside the screen and accept it as coming *through* the screen. Only a little use is needed ; for myself the length of a single performance sufficed.

Now in the matter of illusion one should remember that the screen

has always been most successful when it has relied most upon the reality of action and least upon the pretence of speech. In other words, it has done best when it has got farthest away from the theatre. Indeed, this was to be expected as soon as the film pretended to be an art. Messrs Warner Brothers claim that the vitaphone is one of those inventions which have revolutionised industry and art. "Industry" may be true; "art" is pure nonsense. It is not within the power of ironmongery and engineering, however complicated and inspired, to revolutionise art, whose laws are immutable. Among those immutable laws is one which lays down that of two examples in any art that one will be the more effective which sticks the closer to its medium. What does the reader think would be the effect upon his consciousness if real quails, cuckoos, and nightingales were introduced into the *Pastoral Symphony*, or real sheep into Strauss's *Don Quixote*? I can tell the reader. The effect would be exactly like looking upon one of those pictures of the Houses of Parliament, in whose clock-tower some realist has inserted a real clock. Let the makers of talkies beware lest in breaking down silence they also break down illusion. Is there not a danger that the speaking film, by deserting its silent medium, must suggest, and make the spectator hanker after, that other medium which is the theatre, and the flesh-and-blood actor who, after all, must always be a better fellow than any combination of disc and ribbon? The danger, I cannot help believing, is very great, though I think there is a way in which it can be circumvented. That way is *to keep the voice within the screen*. In *The Jazz Singer* there was a dialogue which lasted five minutes. Al Jolson, who forced his voice upon the ear very much in the way that the voices in Mrs Bardell's front room forced themselves upon the ear of Mrs Clippins, gave us illusion coupled with admiration that a machine could do so well. Eugenie Besserer, who played the old woman, was content to mumble, and here illusion was perfect and unmarred. Every flesh-and-blood actor knows that he must not speak *at* an audience, the essence of theatrical illusion being that the actor is overheard. The same applies to the films, the essence of film illusion being that the film actor shall be overheard. But I have overrun my space without touching upon two further points in connection with the talkies. The first point is of TERRIFIC IMPORTANCE. The second point is of importance MORE TERRIFIC STILL. (How catching is the magniloquence of the Messrs Warner!) I propose to deal with both points next week.

## 6. More About the Talkies

October 17, 1928.

NOW FOR THOSE TWO MATTERS of terrific importance in connection with the talkies about which, up to now, there has been a conspiracy of silence. The first is concerned with the duration in time of the cinema shot ; the second with the suspension of the musical accompaniment. I will deal with these separately. How long does the reader imagine that the average cinema shot lasts ; in other words, how often in the silent film has it been found necessary to change the shot to avoid eye monotony ? I have asked several people, and have received answers varying from twenty seconds to a full minute. It will probably surprise readers to know that the average film shot is not more than five seconds. I do not ask the reader to take my word for this ; let him, next time he goes to the pictures, test the matter for himself. A stop-watch is not necessary. All he has to do is to use the method practised by astronomers before the invention of stop-watches. This method consists in repeating the first six letters of the alphabet as quickly as is consonant with distinct articulation, together with the number of the second. Thus—ABCDEF—one ; ABCDEF—two ; ABCDEF—three. He will find by the time he has said this that exactly three seconds have elapsed. Using this method he will discover that ten seconds is a very long time indeed for a shot. But let me grant ten seconds for the sake of argument. How much dialogue do the makers of the talkies imagine they are going to get into ten seconds ? Alternatively, how much extra pleasure shall we receive from the talkie dialogue, after the novelty has worn off, to compensate us for eye boredom ? It seems to me that the voices will have to be delightful, and the dialogue wittier than that of the average stage play. I hope I am not condemning the talkies beforehand, but I suggest that this is a fence which will require an immense amount of negotiating. Fortunately America is one of those countries where nothing except the impossible seems worth achieving. At least that is the view to which the artless babble of her publicity-mongers has persuaded me. I confess that what I saw and heard in the "trailer" to *The Terror* convinced me that the talkies are damned. Miss May McAvoy is a delicious little person whose silent miming I could watch for hours.

But five minutes of that accent would drive me into the street, for the salutary, precautionary reason that ten minutes of it would drive me into Bedlam. For the rest, the mixture of vocal styles suggested that the parody of the talkies in Mr Hulbert's revue is no parody at all but sober statement.

In the matter of the suspended musical accompaniment, let me ask what readers consider is the first function of music in the cinema. By the way, I am presuming that while the talking goes on the orchestra will stop. If it doesn't and our film talkers are going to adopt the Meredithian habit of "crooning through the coo," why, then, my objection is disposed of. I have asked many people what they believe to be the first function of film music. They have nearly all returned the answer that it is to supply and foster the correct atmosphere—a good answer which perfectly defines the *second* function of the film orchestra. The first function is *to help the spectator to see better*, which sounds a paradox, but isn't. Go to any private view of a film where there is no music and you will find that the attention, and therefore the eye, are continually distracted by casual whispering, striking of matches, coughing, and all the hundred and one little noises which are lost when the ear is occupied. I doubt very much whether film dialogue will conquer chatter in the way that music does. This, then, is the second fence before the talkies. There is yet a third fence connected with music which is so enormous that I dare hardly mention it for fear of discouraging too greatly the tender talkie plant. This obstacle is built up out of the fact that I personally have never seen any film which without music would be even remotely tolerable.

No film that I have ever seen has, by itself and unaided, occupied more than a quarter of my theatre-going mind. How in the absence of music am I to divert the remaining three-quarters? Drink? I am not in the habit of going to the theatre in a state of intoxication. Dope? I do not know where to get any. Sentimental dalliance with the young lady next to me? She invariably turns out to be an aged gentleman with spectacles and a beard. Sleep? Well, that is always possible. The first duty of a dramatic critic, said William Archer, is to learn to sleep sitting upright and without anybody noticing. In that respect I have always been a dramatic critic of absolutely the highest class. No, unless all the talkies are to be written by Mr Frederick Lonsdale, for which I can hardly hope, I can see nothing before me except a nightmare in which unspeakable drivel is snuffed at me by actors who have never learned to talk. I remember a good many years ago hearing a speech

by Victor Grayson, the one-time Socialist M.P. He said that he was so great a believer in the accurate use of language that he would never use any word unless he could derive it from its original roots. The date was just about the time when tinned music first began to excite public attention, which accounts for the heckler's choice of word. "Derive the word *gramophone*!" he shouted. "That's easy, my friend," replied Grayson. "*Gramophone* is derived from two Greek words—*gramos*, I speak, and *phonos*, through a tin tube!" And that, dear readers of the "*Tatler*," seems to me to sum up the talkies exactly.

My film-going this week has been unsensational, though abounding pleasantly enough in the ridiculous. *The Last Moment* at the Capitol showed me a young actor who leaves the scene in full pierrot costume to attend the bedside of his dying mother, distant some hundred miles or so. But since the actor arrives at the garden gate, still in pierrot costume and in full make-up, we gather that American corridor trains have no conveniences for a change of clothes or even for a wash and brush up. Extraordinary how backward some progressive countries can be! Otherwise a good picture. I went one night to see John Barrymore in a revival at the Avenue Pavilion of the old *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* film, and I can only say that if the talkie-mongers think they could profitably add conversation to that masterpiece of acting, they must be of the order which believes a thunderstorm can be improved by small talk. But before this I had to sit through *The Secret Hour*, which is the play called "*They Knew What They Wanted*" turned upside down. In the play the timid little waitress from a "spaghetti joint" insisted upon marrying the middle-aged farmer, though she couldn't help loving the hobo! In the film she married the hobo to start with. But perhaps that was because the frail, undersized, half-starved little waitress, so exquisitely played in America by Pauline Lord, was entrusted to the big-boned, masterful, and obviously not half-starved Pola Negri.

## 7. "The Scarlet Pimpernel"

November 14, 1938.

IT IS PROPER that a critic of films or anything else should make confession of his prejudices. *The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel* at the Marble Arch Pavilion gives me a capital opportunity. I am the only

inhabitant of these islands who has never read *The Scarlet Pimpernel* or any of its sequels. This is a deliberate and not an accidental omission. I do not "hold with" stories about gallant Englishmen meddling with every other country's business except their own. I do not hold with them in fact or in fiction. To me Byron has always been a slightly ridiculous figure hobbling about the Near East, wooing a crowd of dagoes whom he would have been ashamed to meet in his own drawing-room, and parading alternate spectacles of the famous bleeding heart and the vanity of a spinster aunt. The reader will not find this in Mr Drinkwater's book on the subject, but it's really all there is to be said about that great man, except that the vein of great poetry runs thinner in him than in any other great poet who has succeeded in getting himself completely forgotten. No, I am not for Byron. Nor am I for anybody who insists upon poking his nose into other people's affairs whether personal or national. I hold it to be no business of mine if the Turks insist upon massacring the Armenians. In this respect I agree with the German professor who said: "If a man will be born an Armenian, he should know what to expect!" I have no sort of regard, even sneaking, for the Englishman who performs prodigies of valour in somebody else's countries. Put it the other way about. Personally, I should very much resent a story in which some noble and turbaned Turk stumped this country delivering Cavaliers from the hands of Cromwell and his myrmidons. I should resent an historical novel in which the Scots were enabled to win the Battle of Bannockburn by the astute counsel of some wily Chink. Writing as I do on November the fifth, I feel I should not particularly care for a tale in which this country owed its safety from Gunpowder Plot to the intervention of some patent-leathered, bespectacled Jap. Let us keep our heroes at home. There is plenty for them to do in their own country.

I am aware that the foregoing sentiments cut me off from the rest of my race which, I understand, peruses the complete cycle of the Baroness Orczy masterpieces at least once a year. But the story of the Scarlet Pimpernel being totally new to me, should I not therefore be a better judge of it as film entertainment than people who know the tale by heart? Coming to it with unencumbered mind, I am sorry to confess that I found it appallingly dull. To begin with, this picture attempts too much. After meandering about with almost crazy slowness for the better part of an hour and a half, the piece suddenly wakes up and in the last half-hour tries to wind up the French Revolution. Well, the tail can sometimes wag the dog, but it can't wag it as vigorously as all

that comes to. Then there is the usual historical distortion. Robespierre was undoubtedly a great man in the sense that Machiavelli was a great man. Yet both have become synonyms for darkness. One does not expect the screen to show us or even to take into consideration such a well-known fact as that, when a young man, Robespierre resigned a judgeship to avoid pronouncing a death sentence. Or that he was a dandy, a brilliant lawyer, and the owner of an extraordinarily beautiful speaking voice. Or that he made repeated if unavailing attempts to stop the massacres in the prisons in September 1792. Take Robespierre's own words at the King's trial. On December 3, 1792, Robespierre said : "This is no trial ; Louis is not a prisoner at the bar ; you are not judges ; you are—you cannot but be—statesmen, and the representatives of the nation. You have not to pass sentence for or against a single man, but you have to take a resolution on a question of the public safety and to decide a question of national foresight. It is with regret that I pronounce the fatal truth ; Louis ought to perish rather than a hundred thousand virtuous citizens ; Louis must die, that the country may live."

These seem to me to be the words of a statesman, not of a butcher. The day is, I presume, still far off when those who weave a film round Robespierre will have the honesty to throw his own words on to the screen. To the end of his life Robespierre wore knee-breeches and silk stockings and had his hair powdered. He never pandered to the mob, and there is no doubt that he owed his downfall to a lack of natural blood-thirstiness. Suspected by his colleagues of being too moderate, he was forced to show himself more tigerish than those other tigers, with the result that under Robespierre the Terror in Paris reached its maximum of fearfulness. He owed his downfall not to any concerted revolt against his authority but to a pure accident of rhetoric. Attacked at the Convention he hesitated momentarily, whereupon that phrase was flung in his face which settled his doom. Robespierre had ordered Danton's execution, and the fatal phrase was : "It is Danton's blood which stifles you !" No Frenchman or assemblage of Frenchmen could be expected not to resent this, and presently Robespierre's head was off. One does not expect the film to tell us that in his private life Robespierre was honest, truthful, and charitable, in habits and manner of life simple and hard-working, in short, a man full of charm and natural affection.

One expects the film to show us the creature of tradition, the undersized, bloated, cynical little pimp. This, in fact, is what Mr Nelson Keys, always a great master of make-up, presents. But having presented

this figure, Mr Keys proceeds to do nothing with him, for the simple reason that the scope of the picture does not allow him to do anything except be absurdly and improbably fooled. I confess, too, that I was a little disappointed in Mr Matheson Lang's performance as Sir Percy Blakeney. It was always a little too much more than life-size, a little too actor-managerish. Mr Lang is said to be an elaborate master of make-up, by which is probably meant that in whatever disguise he may appear you instantly spot that it is Mr Lang who is so cleverly disguised. Why, when the young woman was so curiously inspecting the letter "R" with which Sir Percy's arm had been branded, did she not raise her eyes from the obvious chalk-mark and take a pull at that obvious beard? And really Mr Lang should give himself a little more trouble. If he doesn't know how much branding with a red-hot iron hurts, he should take a lesson from John Barrymore in *The Sea Beast*. Mr Lang was not more affected than by a prick from a hypodermic needle. Miss Juliette Compton simpered throughout with a complete absence of any other expression. Keen supporter of British films though I am, they must not bore me if I am to praise them. And this one did!

## 8. "The Burgomaster of Stilemonde"

January 23, 1929.

WHAT IS THERE TO BE SAID about *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* as a war play? Perhaps two things. The first is that it is not a war play in the limited sense in which we use that phrase. It does not revive in our minds those ardours of 1914, and therefore is in no sense a recruiting poster against the next war. It casts no odium upon the nation which was our enemy, and therefore contains no rancorous prophecy of reprisal. *The Burgomaster of Stilemonde* embodies the noblest sort of tragedy, the opposition of two mutually destructive rights. It is a tragic thing that an innocent community suffering invasion should be compelled to atone for a chance shot; it would be a terrible thing for an invading army if its commander should allow such shots to be fired with impunity. Maeterlinck's play shows the family of the Burgomaster weeping and crying aloud in the clutch of circumstances, and the German commander disabled from bowing his head in mercy. The piece, then, is essentially

noble. The second thing to be said about it is that it sings not arms but the plain man. The Burgomaster is an ordinary middle-class individual who cultivates his roses as the philosopher in Montaigne plants his cabbages. He has no mind to heroism, and has never contemplated it ; no thought for death, or, if he thinks of it, puts away the thought. Yet he dies, and dies heroically, because the alternative is to fall below the ordinary standard of the average decent man. "Hang it all, Claus," we imagine him saying to the old gardener, "it's jolly decent of you to offer to take my place, but I can't accept, and you know I can't ; the thing's jolly well not done !" That is, in effect, what the Burgomaster does say, only of course he says it in the idiom of his own nation.

The film retains and repeats the essential nobility of the play, with one lovely addition which occurs when the Burgomaster, as he walks to his execution, is allowed to spend a last moment in his conservatory saying good-bye to his flowers. But I am not quite sure that I see the value of the Burgomaster's additional son. My recollection of the play is now vague, but I seem to remember that the shot which killed the German officer was fired by the Belgian to whom the Burgomaster was giving sanctuary. Perhaps that is wrong. But I cannot help thinking that in a tragedy—which *The Burgomaster* is, and a very austere tragedy too—the shot should be fired by somebody on purpose, and not by the additional son stumbling on a rifle in the brushwood and setting it off by mistake. Incidentally, the angle at which the gun was placed made it dangerous only to skylarks, anybody on the floor, including the entire German Army, being perfectly safe. Altogether I could not see the *raison d'être* for the existence of this young man who kept hopping in and out of an oak tree in a very creditable imitation of Charles II. But for the rest, there has been no monkeying with the title, and the story of the play has not been essentially tampered with, though there were one or two horrid moments when a certain flurry and scurry on the part of the German Army—two soldiers, to be precise, a trooper and a cyclist—suggested that Stilemonde was going to be retaken by the Russians or somebody to enable the film to arrive at a happy ending. Our fears were groundless, all that the German Army was up to being the evacuation of Stilemonde and a move onwards. Nevertheless I could not see the purpose of those last shots which served only to prove that Epping Forest, where the film was taken, has some nice stretches of road. The film should really come to an end with the death of the Burgomaster.

Women in a tragedy are always a nuisance, for the reason that they insist upon keeping up the agony long after everybody else has done

with it. "Sigh no more, ladies," is really what Shakespeare thought of the matter. The Burgomaster's daughter in this film is no exception to the general rule. It required all Lady Martin-Harvey's brains and tact to prevent her being, in the play, what you might call an obliterative bore. She was still a bore, though Lady Martin-Harvey did at least succeed in enlisting our sympathy for her. The wretch would go talking about suicide, lean in black crêpe against the Burgomaster's clock, and transform his carpet into an inky pool. This was not Lady Martin-Harvey's fault but Maeterlinck's, the trouble being that we did not care the smallest number of hoots about the daughter's lacerated bosom. Here I think the film is definitely superior to the play. The play had to have a third act, and what we were interested in was what was happening to the Burgomaster "off" and not the bewilderments and bansheeings of the daughter "on." In the film we really do see what is happening to the Burgomaster, which on the whole is an improvement. The film's capacity for seeing through walls ought to have enabled us to do without the young woman. But that is another characteristic of the sex—they cannot realise when they are *de trop*. So we had to have Fern Andra sitting bolt upright at luncheon like all the Trojan women rolled into one, and with far too much black on her eyes. Why does no film director say simply : " Go back to your room, girl, and take that stuff off ! " The object of make-up is not to look made-up. What is more important is that in every shot except about two Stilemonde is represented as a city of the dead. The Uhlan's coming down the main street find not a mouse stirring. The wounded Belgian struggling home in broad daylight meets not so much as a cat, and nothing about the place gives one the impression that it is a town in being. On the other hand, the horses belonging to the German Army are the best I have seen in any film, since all of them are worthy of entrance in a class for officers' chargers at Olympia.

Mr Wilfred Shine gives a moving performance as old Claus, and as the Burgomaster's son-in-law Mr Robert Andrews, whom we generally see doing nothing nonchalantly on the sofas of Miss Marie Tempest's comedies, is at last allowed to give us some of the talent which is in him. Mr Fred Raynham plays the German officer with excellent propriety. I shall take the liberty of saying nothing at all about the Burgomaster in this film. In the play Sir John Martin-Harvey, in achieving a masterpiece of quietism, gave one of the most perfect performances I have ever seen. My ears are still filled with the poignant vibrations of that gently reasoning voice, and I am quite unable to appreciate the impression

made by the silent figure upon those who have never seen the play. On the whole, this is a film of which British Filmcraft Productions, Limited, may well be proud. The Germans will surely smile when they realise that the music for this Belgian episode is drawn from such thoroughly German sources as "Tannhäuser," "Tristan and Isolda," "Götterdämmerung," and Beethoven's "Coriolan" Overture. In honour of British music, let me hasten to add that these august borrowings are occasionally interlarded with the authentic, pert tinkle of home-grown melodies.

## 9. *Zola and Mr Brown*

January 30, 1929.

DURING THE LAST FORTNIGHT London has suffered a sporadic and virulent attack of Zola. The cause of the outbreak will never be discovered; we only know that it happened. It happened in two worlds—that of the theatre and that of the film. The indefatigable Mr Grein's French, or nearly French, players began it with a performance of *Thérèse Raquin* at the tireless and persistent little Arts Theatre Club. This was a curious choice, since one had thought that this particular novel would have been long forgotten by everybody. In an age which will not read Balzac, who could be expected to find time for Zola? On the following day the industrious and pertinacious Mr Jack de Leon followed suit at the Kew Theatre with the same play; which, as Alice might have remarked, was Kewriouser and Kewriouser. Then the Avenue Pavilion burst forth with the same piece disguised under the preposterous title of *Thou Shalt Not*, a title which has no more reference to the Sixth Commandment than to any other. I wonder if I may say without rudeness that I sedulously avoided both plays, and have no intention of going to see the film. I have had my attack of Zola and got over it, and do not want to be drawn once more into the zone of infection. The Rougon-Macquart rash is a terrible infliction and, once contracted, will last you a twelvemonth. It must be getting on for forty years since I had it—I think somewhere in the early 'nineties. I contracted it from Mr George Moore, and could place the year exactly if I could find out the date of that author's "Impressions and Opinions." For fun's

sake let me reproduce here the first paragraph of that essay which is a more perfect parody of Mr Moore than even Max has achieved. Note that the essay is called "My Impressions of Zola."

Manet had persuaded me to go to the *bal de l'Assommoir* dressed as a Parisian workman, for he enjoyed incongruities, and the blouse and the casquette, with my appearance and my accent, appealed to his imagination. "There is no Frenchman living in London who occupies the same position as you do in Paris," he said, and I pondered over his words as I followed him through *tout Paris* assembled at the *Élysée Montmartre*, for the ball given in honour of the play that was being performed at the *Ambigu*. "But I must introduce you to Zola. There he is," he said, pointing to a thickly built, massive man in evening clothes for, as Manet said, a serious writer cannot be expected to put on fancy dress. Zola bowed and passed on, chilling us a little; Manet would have liked to watch him struggling into a new acquaintanceship, and we walked on together conscious of our failure, myself thinking how pleasant it would have been to have gone with them into a corner, and talked art for half an hour, "and what a wonderful memory it would have been!" I thought, and begged Manet a few minutes later to come with me in search of Zola. But he was nowhere to be found.

Well, I value that passage highly, but I am not at all sure that I should not have valued equally highly Zola's impressions of Mr Moore. Later on, Mr Moore repented of his enthusiasm for Zola, or at least Max pretended that he did: "I am sick of the smell of the incense I have swung to this and that false god—Zola, Yeats, *et tous ces autres*. I am angry to have got housemaid's knee, because I got it on a doorstep that led to nowhere." I, too, am determined never again to kneel on that too-realistic doorstep, for the simple reason that I should probably want to go on kneeling, and there is simply not enough time nowadays for this tremendous writer. I feel, too, that this sudden outbreak is a mere flash in the theatrical and cinema pans which will have died out before these lines attain print.

What interests me more at the moment is the sudden discovery by my friend, the brilliant critic of the "Saturday Review" and the "Observer," Mr Ivor Brown, that the silent drama is not really silent. "The film star," says Mr Brown, "has to have his atmosphere prepared for him by orchestral gurgitations and ditherings; he knows that unless the feelings of the audience are somehow kindled by external means of combustion, he may be only a chilly shadow on a chilly screen." Is this quite fair? The film writers, the film producers, and the film actors—do not these know that they are ultimately going to perform their tasks

in conjunction with music? It would be a poor reproach against opera to suggest that the words and the acting cannot stand by themselves but must have music. Mr Brown goes on: "The music is the substitute for the magnetic quality of the actor who is present; as a rule it is, like most substitutes, tiresome and futile." I do not agree that the music in a cinema is a substitute. It is as inherent in the scheme as was Wagner's musical score to the dramatic play of "Tristan and Isolda." In fact, many film producers indicate exactly what the musical accompaniment to their films shall be, and insist upon that accompaniment being carried out. As for the music in cinemas being "tiresome and futile," I can only suggest, most respectfully, that Mr Brown finds this to be so because Mr Brown's ear happens not to be musical.

We have all heard non-golfers describe the game of golf as hitting a ball and spending the rest of the day looking for it. Unable to perceive the virtues of the game, these non-golfers fall back upon childish abuse of it. Their description is amusing, but it in no way conveys any of the attributes of the game. Mr Brown talks of "the quiet, little performance at the Arts Theatre Club, freed from entangling alliances with cat-gut and powerful brass." Does not the phrase "entangling alliances with cat-gut" denote the non-musician just as exactly as that nonsense about the little white ball denotes the non-golfer? Perhaps I do Mr Brown wrong. Perhaps he is a musician. Perhaps he can play upon some instrument a simple melody, say "The Bluebells of Scotland." The performance by him of this tune, even with one finger, will draw from me the amplest apology. The whole point about the film is its value as a composite entertainment, in which respect, I again submit, it is as much an entity as an opera. It is, of course, true that the films cannot get on without music. But the truth goes farther than this—almost as far as to make me wonder how music has managed to get along without the film! Time was when I admired Mendelssohn's "Fingal's Cave" overture for itself alone, when in its opening notes I could hear the hollow wash of ocean tides. But I doubt whether these would satisfy me now, whether I must not have the rearward view of *Mea Culpa* stretching her arms to the sunrise or the sunset, lending her tresses to the wind, and kissing with dimpled feet the Hebridean Ocean.

## 10. "Noah's Ark"

April 3, 1929.

ONE DAY WHEN THE ELDER GUITRY was engaged at breakfast, always a formidable affair with the old man, there entered to him an inquisitive journalist. Whereupon the following conversation took place :

" What is Sacha doing now ? "

" Writing."

" Writing what ? "

" A play."

" A play about what ? "

" The Book of Genesis."

" Who for ? "

" Sarah."

" And what part does Madame Bernhardt play ? "

The old man's fork, laden with cold tongue and the early *primeurs*, halted in mid-air, while its owner's eyes slowly travelled over and took in the inconsiderable young man. At last Guitry snapped out the single word " Noah ! " and resumed feeding.

I confess that this anecdote and the thought of how the old man must have enjoyed his pitfall refreshed me during the inept *longcurs* of *Noah's Ark*, the new wonder film at the Piccadilly. I shall be prepared to say presently that this is in some respects the finest film I have, yet seen. But that does not alter the fact that some of its passages are extraordinarily inept and of a corresponding lengthiness. *Noah's Ark* exhibits the American film at its best and its worst. The story establishes in the familiar Cecil B. de Mille manner a parallel between the old wickedness and the new, the old Deluge and the flood of contending passions which began with the modern Stock Exchange and culminated in the World War. A significant note of what is wrong with all American filmdom is struck with the very first title, which informs us that " Messrs Warner Brothers present *Noah's Ark*, featuring . . ." Now what does the reader suppose such a film could possibly feature ? Noah ? Mrs Noah ? The wicked people who went about worshipping false gods ? The Deluge itself ? All of these things are possible, even probable. But

Messrs Warner Brothers have other notions of what a film based on the Book of Genesis should feature. That notion is Miss Dolores Costello. Well, well ! Did not *Wings* feature Miss Clara Bow, and can the Americans conceive of any war film which does not feature some pin-headed American miss ? The answer to the first question is Yes, and to the second No, and the key to the entire situation is found in this, that the American film mind, though it can deal competently enough with the stupendous, cannot help vulgarising any scene which approaches the intimate.

Once more this film proves how right beyond any possible shadow of doubt I am, and must be, about the talkies. Swirling floods in comparison with which Niagara is but a cascade in a tea-cup do their work silently, and we do not notice that they are silent. Temples the size of St Paul's topple and crash into the Chaldean strand soundlessly as a feather, and our illusion is not disturbed. A bridge and the whole of a transcontinental express are precipitated some 300 feet into a river without enough noise to wake a sleeping child. It doesn't matter ; the illusion remains perfect. But there comes a moment when it is necessary for Miss Dolores Costello to converse with Mr George O'Brien, whereupon she must yap her pretty nothings, and he must bawl suitable replies in accents which the amplifiers turn into something half-way between harmonium and frying-pan. I could have wished that all America's talkie perpetrators had been present on that first night at the Piccadilly to hear the titter which went throughout the entire audience as soon as the preposterous talkie began. All the intimate part of this film and all the love scenes were written down to the intelligence of all the world's scullery-maids. Miss Costello, too, looked and behaved exactly like a Ziegfeld Folly, whether she was being shot as a German spy, transfixed with arrows as a Chaldean maiden sacrificed to Jaghut, pulled from beneath marble columns, floating on the top of the flood, or being carried by her lover into the Ark. It is true that when she was pulled out from under the express train she was covered with mud, but inasmuch as the train had fallen into a swamp, I do not see that the producer could help himself. Therefore no marks to him on that account ! But for the rest of the play, when Miriam, the daughter of Noah, should presumably have been looking Hebrew or Egyptian or Aztec or Mesopotamian or something anyhow belonging to the past—through all this part of the film the fair Dolores was that perfect anachronism—the golden-haired ninny *de nos jours*. And there my grumbling ceases for the moment, except to say that the war scenes and the modern events

of this film were full of the most mawkish and nauseating emotionalism to which the American film trade has yet sunk.

The spectacular part, however, exceeded in magnificence, contrivance, marshalling, and mechanical and architectural ingenuity all the marvels of stupendousness that I have yet seen. I can quite understand that refectories had to be built to cope with the exhausted, and hospitals to deal with the maimed and wounded. But the film in its spectacular aspect was much more than an engineering *tour de force*. The pictures as pictures were nobly conceived. In the temple scenes it was difficult and perhaps impossible for Mr Michael Curtiz to get away from a blending of Alma-Tadema and Edwin Long. But in the flood scenes the mind was sent harking back to the great masters whom the pictures momentarily recalled and dissolved into one another. Thus the lowering sky and the wicked city shaken by the great wind might have been a masterpiece by Dürer, while next minute the armoured figures struggling in the waters would remind one of that battlepiece in which Rubens contested the passage of the Tiber. All this part of the film was unendingly magnificent, and though the picture was still showing at midnight, I could have wished it to continue. But again I must be allowed a grumble, this time concerning the entire, complete, and utter inadequacy of the tinned music which accompanied the film. To begin with, there was not enough volume of sound. Tinned music is in this respect between the devil of paltriness and the deep sea of the amplifiers. What was wanted was music worthy of this film, in other words a first-rate orchestra. The quality of the music, too, was almost uninterruptedly bad throughout. It is true that we had smatterings of Mozart and Tschaikowsky, but the rest was feeble and commonplace. Cannot the American mind realise that worthy accompaniment to a story from the Book of Genesis can be provided only by the old masters or modern genius? The film had one *leit-motif*, a theme of the most heart-rending banality—far, far worse, if that be possible, than *Sonny Boy*. Of the players, I preferred a gentleman who calls himself "Guinn Big Boy Williams." As for Noah, I can only say that Mr Paul McAllister looked his six hundred years and then some!

## 11. *A Plea for Moderate Thinking*

"May 8, 1929.

A FORMER ARMY SERVICE CORPS OFFICER recounts how one day in the early part of the war, when he was unloading biscuits, Sir John French, as he then was, rode up to him and said : " How's the battle going ? " My friend looked up from his biscuit tins and said : " Sorry, sir, and all that sort of thing, but I didn't know there was a battle on ! " Nobody could be in any such doubt as to the battle now raging on the film front. The difficulty about this battle is that the front is extended to such a length that nobody can survey the whole of it, in addition to which that front seems to be made up of numbers of small parts in no way related to each other. I should like in this article to glance at one or two bits of the line in the great talkie war. Let me begin with Mr E. V. Lucas's recent attack upon the talkies on the ground that in supplanting the silent films they are doing away with " the greatest boon that has ever been offered to the deaf." This seems to me to be like suggesting that to comfort the blind we should all go and live underground. Mr Lucas also objects to talkies because of their prejudicial effect upon the theatre. That is up to the theatre, which must take care of itself, and the plea seems to me to be one on all fours with that of horse owners against the motor industry.

Progress is always bad for somebody ; the only thing to be said in favour of progress is that the good it does exceeds the harm. Anything which fails to do this is not progress. Mr Lucas in half a dozen lines suggests that the film lacks the magnetism of personality, that the voices in the talkies are " the dulcet tones of sea lions," and that the stage of Shakespeare and Sheridan, Robertson and Pixero is now seriously menaced. Now I really cannot recall ever having seen so many *bévues* in so short a space. To deny the magnetism of personality to Jannings or to Garbo is not to know that quality when one sees it. In the matter of the sea lions, what else does Mr Lucas expect from the early stages of a new mechanism ? I invite him to compare the latest Parlophone or H.M.V. electrical records with the attempts of twenty years ago, where one heard more needle than sound. The quality of the voice-recording

has made an enormous improvement in the last three months, and there is no reason why we should suppose that that improvement will not continue. I am a lover of the theatre and of acting, yet I have no fear for the great ones of the theatre proper, and I say confidently that whenever another Bernhardt or Irving arises they will play to full theatres and reduce their mouthing screen rivals to the shadows that they are. Nor have I any fear for the drama as we still know it. I do not prophesy full houses for a new Shakespeare, since we do not pay that compliment to the old one. But I have no fear whatever for the new Sheridan whenever he shall arise. It is the bad or inefficient plays which will not survive competition with the screen, and for that I am grateful. Presumably Mr Lucas does not see as many poor plays as I do, or he would welcome any expedient for sending them to the devil !

Talkies are not all of one kind. There is the photo-play or stage-play, photographed with the actors speaking their parts aloud. This has hardly anything to do with the film as we used to know it. It merely provides a bastard kind of playgoing, and it is too early yet to say whether people will like this form of entertainment when the novelty has worn off. Let me give an illustration. Suppose that in the early days of motoring all motor cars had been compelled to go to Wanstead Flats. It is inconceivable that anybody could at any time want to go to Wanstead Flats, but it is also inconceivable that everybody would not have gone to Wanstead Flats for the sheer joy of the jaunt and to experience the new form of locomotion. But if motoring was to continue we may be sure that after the novelty had worn off it must have found some other destination. In the talkies that destination is already found, and it is the sound film. At the beginning I was as much an embittered opponent of talkies as Mr Lucas. But one film alone, *White Shadows in the South Seas*, sufficed to convince me that the day of the completely silent film is over. And rightly. There seems to me to be sound philosophy as well as courtesy in Hamlet's : " And therefore as a stranger give it welcome." The artistic Russian film makers in welcoming the new medium have been quick to see that it may possess aesthetic as well as financial advantages. Discussing certain of Pudowkin's proposals in his address to the Film Society, the Special Correspondent of *The Times* said :

It is as if, in the scene in "Hamlet" where Horatio challenges the Ghost, we could actually hear the crowing of the cock on the dead morning air, as in the direction given : " the cock crows." Does not this impact of the commonplace upon a scene of supernatural terror give a superb heightening to the drama such as no

other stroke could achieve, and is it not our nearest parallel from classic stock to what Pudowkin promises for the screen?

Perhaps Mr Lucas would argue that the cock even in "Hamlet" must not crow because the deaf cannot hear it. Will not that witty and clever master of the essay reconsider his attitude? We cannot abolish the talkies, and certainly mere vituperation will not lead them an inch of the way we want them to go. It is better to strive for the good than to rail at the ill, said a Victorian poet of some repute. With this maxim in mind I attended a luncheon party given at the Trocadero in honour of Mr Harry Warner, the pioneer of talking pictures. After the lunch there was speech-making, at the end of which questions were invited.

I ventured to put my question something, as near as I can remember, like this: "We have listened to much of absorbing interest upon how sounds are to be reproduced, but nothing as to what sounds. Is it the intention of Messrs Warner Brothers to devote to the matter which they reproduce the same attention which they give to the manner of its reproduction? Will Messrs Warner Brothers undertake to engage artistic brains equal in quality to their engineering brains?" Replying, Mr Warner instancec taking to *The Ring* at Covent Garden a young man who went to sleep some forty times, and said at the end: "Don't you ever bring me to this joint again!" Mr Warner said that he must cater for this young man multiplied by millions. I said: "We are to take it definitely, then, that Messrs Warner Brothers' interests in the films are financial, and not aesthetic?" Amid tumultuous applause Mr Warner said: "No, sir." That is where I fault these delicious innocents who either do not think at all or think illogically. Confessing a personal aesthetic bias, he pleaded that he was not morally entitled to produce artistic pictures since the capital of Messrs Warner Brothers consisted largely of the savings of widows and orphans. His proper answer to my second question should have been: "Yes, sir. We should like to make good pictures, but the public taste insists that we shall make bad ones." But my space has run out and I can only sum up my complaint against two charming people by saying that one of them thinks too loosely and the other too crossly.

## 12. *A Philosophy of Talkies*

June 26, 1929.

EVERYBODY IN HIS LIFE plays one faultless round of golf. It has fallen to my lot to play two such rounds. One was in the year 1919, when, miracles proving as confluent as smallpox, I holed Prince's Golf Course in 75. I would have put an exclamation mark after this figure had I not been afraid of the printer recording my score as 751. And may I beg the reader to note that the course was Prince's, which by general consent is some six strokes harder than St George's? I have always flattered myself, then, that in 1919, *morally speaking*, I holed Sandwich in 69. The second remarkable performance of my career occurred the day before yesterday, on a course to which the highest honours are always given, to wit, Deal. Speaking as one who achieved Sandwich in 69—I find it convenient to drop the moral part of the business—I am not at all sure that I agree about Deal. In my considered view only eleven-eighteenths of Deal is really first-class. I hold that the superb part of Deal begins with the sixth hole and then slips back until the fourteenth, which, moreover, I should not consider a first-class hole had it not been for a certain two got at it the day before yesterday. But about the last four holes there can be no disputing, and a casual survey of the works of Messrs Bernard Darwin and A. C. M. Croome suggests that they seldom write about any other holes. Let it be said, then, with all becoming modesty, that in the high wind of the day before yesterday they were holed in one over fours. As a certain opponent bitterly remarked at lunch: "They call these the Cinque Ports! I should call them the Sunk Putts." It may be submitted, tentatively, that the man who, on top of such a feat, attempted another round, would be an insufferable idiot. Self and partner, therefore, spent the afternoon in a motor boat, whereby hangs, or is alleged to hang, the purport of this article. We first visited the Goodwin Sands, whose delights and dangers were described to us by a Jacobean boatman in a Kentish dialogue of which I, personally, did not understand one word in twelve. Sheering off the sands, we then went round—the nautical phrase eludes me—the wreck of the light-ship which was cut in half

some months ago. Three vessels were engaged in the affair, and it was hoped to raise the wreck on the afternoon tide. We stayed some time, had a good look, saw nothing, and came away. Returned once more to shore, we passed a weather-beaten effigy offering us a view of the wreck through a brass tube which he was impudent enough to call a telescope. Enthusiastically we paid sixpence for a distant and cloudy view of what we had just seen at close quarters. Be it noted that I call it a view by courtesy, the glass, in my opinion, having been wiped by a butter-smeared piece of flannel. And now comes my point. Not only did we deem our ineffectual gazing well worth sixpence, but we even went out after tea to have another look. It is here that I invite readers to find a parallel with the talkies.

Returned to London, I stepped out of the brilliant afternoon sunshine into that inky well which is the stall floor at the Capitol. There I saw, or rather heard, a "100 per cent talkie." This phrase is beginning to fill me with a completer nausea than any other, but that is by the way. The piece was called *Blackwaters*, and presently I became aware that I was being entertained by a conglomeration of human beings which included a cannibal, a young lady in an opera-cloak, a religious maniac whose general air of villainy was accentuated by a patch over one eye, two extremely ordinary young men in evening dress, an obvious detective, and an equally obvious insurance broker. These had forgathered, for no discoverable purpose, in the fo'c'sle of a four-master fog-bound on the coast of what looked like Labrador. I spent the greater part of an hour watching the presentation of a story the literary level of which was that of the "blood" devoured by my butcher boy between, and sometimes during, his rounds. Yet it apparently enthralled the five or possibly six dozen people whom my accustomed eyes now began to discern in the darkness. Leaving the meagre but doubtless select audience to its enthralment, I wandered across to the New Gallery Cinema, where an enormous crowd had assembled to listen to the "First All-Talking, Singing, and Dancing Screen Revue," the title of which was *The Follies of 1929*. Here again was a story of a child-like fatuity to infatuate the nursemaid as she perambulates, pushes, and peruses. Such a story, in short, as that which Miss Prism left in the bassinet which afterwards, "through the elaborate investigations of the Metropolitan Police, was discovered at midnight standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater." At one point of the proceedings a young woman came forward and sang the first of what the announcements at the door foreshadowed as "Instant Song Hits." The title of this drivel was "Why Can't I

Be Like You?", and I wish to put it upon record that never at any street corner or beneath any window have I heard a caterwauling so monstrously abysmal. Exception shall not be taken at the phrase, which I have invented to connote a stupendous enormity.

The rest of the film was a mechanical reproduction of a revue, and about as different from the real thing as watching a round of golf is from playing the game yourself. And here I come to the philosophy of the business, which is that the enjoyment of a thing and the enjoyment of its reproduction by mechanical means are separate and not to be confounded. I had seen the wreck at close quarters, yet took pleasure in looking at it from five miles away through a piece of dirty glass. Analysed, what I actually enjoyed in the second operation was not the view of the wreck, but the looking through the dirty glass. To anyone who is really keen about telescopes it is quite indifferent whether he is looking at Saturn's Rings or Clapham brought to Muswell Hill. The looking, and not the thing looked at, is what matters. So it is with these wretched and preposterous things known as talkies. What the talkies are saying does not matter. How they are saying it does not matter. That which delights the talkie fan is the knowledge that he is listening to something potted.

### *13. An Old Nostalgia*

August 28, 1929.

TWO THINGS HAVE ALWAYS SEEMED to me to be of the very essence of Paris: the opera of "Manon"—Massenet's version, of course, not Puccini's—and the legend of Sarah Bernhardt. I say "legend," because to-day Paris has forgotten her. There is some recollection of a funeral with a *cortege* kilometres long, and lots and lots of flowers. There is a dingy, neglected tomb in Père Lachaise. There is a theatre of her name, not very fashionable, and in which farces are played. There may be a statue, though I have not seen it; and the only portrait of her that I know is that done by Clairin in 1876, and which now hangs in the Petit Palais. This, though a good likeness, is a bad picture, and I have often wondered what Augustus John as a young man was thinking of that he did not paint her. It was to see Bernhardt that I, at the age of fourteen or

thereabouts, ran away not only from school and home but for the night, the expenses of railway and most modest hotel running away with the accumulated savings of many terms. The piece was "La Dame aux Camélias," the venue Liverpool, and I remember returning home proudly and announcing that I was ready for anything in the way of a thrashing that my enraged parents felt inclined to bestow. I was saved by my mother remarking to my father: "My dear, you know you did the same thing when you were a boy. Only it was Macready in 'The Corsican Brothers.'" The argument as to whether it was or was not that particular play lasted some twenty shiversome minutes, after which I was allowed, so to speak, to hoist my slacks. And on the following Saturday my parents took me to see Irving and Ellen Terry in "Olivia," after making me promise never to have anything to do with the stage except as an occasional recreation.

The foregoing will perhaps explain—it is certainly the only excuse I have—why when in Paris last week I should trudge all the way to the Place de la République to see a film purporting to be *La Dame aux Camélias*. But the film company was at least honest, and it declared that the picture was the work of a Mr Fred Niblo, "as inspired by Dumas fils." That the film was an old one, and that it was a waste of time to go to see it, seems to me to be a childish objection. The play is an old one, going back, if my memory serves me right, to 1856. And if I live to be ninety I shall still visit the old play wherever and whenever it is possible, in any form that may be devised for it, even if it be a talkie. However bad the version, however remote from all that made Dumas's play a masterpiece, I shall still suck melancholy from it and enjoy old recollection. For the benefit of those whose theatre minds can go farther back than yesterday, let me write a little about this silent film.

It began admirably, with a view of a wet street, hundreds of wet umbrellas, and the Paris crowd hastening to the sale of Marguerite's effects. This was a scene credibly Parisian, and of the kind that Balzac and the Goncourts loved to describe. Next we saw Marguerite, at this period a simple-minded assistant in a glove shop, and here we made acquaintance with the Comte de Varville, a sufficient rascal. As for Marguerite she was, of course, completely unrecognisable beneath the roguish, round-faced charm of Norma Talmadge. Presently we saw Marguerite launched and appearing at the opera under Varville's protection. I judge from Miss Talmadge's costume on this occasion that the film must be about five years old. Curiously enough the dancers in the ballet at the opera seemed to be indulging in jazz! Some attempt

was made to reproduce the atmosphere of the 'fifties by giving Varville a carriage and pair ; the rest of the crowd used motors. Except that Prudence hardly appeared at all, and that Nanine was much too young, the film up till now followed the play closely enough. The love scenes were good if a trifle perfunctory. The scene in the villa was disappointing. M. Duval *père* did not wear the famous top hat or remove it at Marguerite's very proper rebuke. Instead, he treated himself to a panama. There was no letter scene, though Marguerite took occasion to offer the one authentic remark that I could trace throughout : "Dites à votre fils que pour lui une femme a pris son cœur entre ses mains, qu'elle l'a broyé, et qu'elle en est morte." With what effect Sarah used to rip out the word "*broyé*" ! However, by way of compensation, Armand went off to Paris in a terrific thunderstorm. The gambling scene was better. Here Gilbert Roland acted really well, though he looked throughout too much like an operatic tenor, and a French one to boot. Covered with bank-notes, Marguerite made exit in a terrific snowstorm.

And then we came to the death scene, which was altogether too short and ineffective. Nichette had disappeared from the story, so that we could not have her marriage to Gustave and the incident of Marguerite's wistful fingering of the bridal veil. Prudence did not come a-borrowing. The doctor did not call, and there was nothing of the Comte de Giray's loving vigil by the bedside. Marguerite did not totter to the window, draw the curtain, and watch the little child at play. She did not take old Duval's letter from beneath her pillow and break down at the word "*abnégation*," as she ought to do, afterwards putting the pillow over the letter and reciting the rest of it by heart. Worst of all, Armand did not return, so that we did not see that gesture which should accompany the words : "Armand ! Ce n'est pas possible que Dieu soit si bon !" Instead, Marguerite offered a few commonplace remarks, after which she changed into a picture and descended from its frame into the arms of her bereaved lover.

But it was all real for the sentimental, working-class, Monday-afternoon audience, whose melting mood received considerable assistance from the sugary selections from "*Manon*" and "*La Traviata*" contributed by the orchestra. Whereas for me the film took on an older and a deeper reality. I swear that throughout the afternoon I was never conscious of Miss Talmadge, and that in my own mind, and dare I say soul, I re-enacted the whole play as I saw it so many, many times. So much so that I found myself repeating the well-remembered phrases ;

"Ainsi, quoi qu'elle fasse, la créature tombée ne se relèvera jamais."  
"Pour nous les longues soirées succèdent aux longs jours." And so on.  
And when I came out I hailed a hansom and, rubbing my eyes, perceived  
that it was a taxi! Next morning I spent half an hour at the Petit  
Palais, gazing, gazing. But it was no good. Sarah is dead.

## 14. *Babylon at Brixton*

September 25, 1929.

EVERY MAN, it is said, has his price, though, of course, if you are an Abraham Lincoln it needs at least a crown in Heaven. I remember some years ago playing golf at Deal with the present amateur tennis champion. He holed everything from all parts of the green, and some of his putts were so uncanny as to make me believe that there was some special virtue in the club. "Is that putter for sale?" I asked. "It is," Baerlein replied, "but you haven't enough money to buy it!" It is in that sort of way that I am bribeable. But the bribe has to be hefty and must certainly exceed a luncheon either *à la carte* or *prix fixe*. Taglioni's is a most agreeable restaurant, and I hereby certify that its trout are perfection and its kidney stew equal to Beaugé's masterpiece. Likewise I see nothing the matter with its Krug, 1919. Further, I can think of no better companion than the delightful lady whose guest I was. It seemed that we were both motorists, the only difference being that she drives badly—a fact to which the much-dinted piece of semi-wreckage at the door bore ample witness—and I can't drive at all. So I willingly accepted the offer of a taxi to drive us to the new Brixton Astoria which was to provide the second part of my entertainment.

Let me break off here to recall a passage in the works of the late A. B. Walkley, who could on occasion achieve a snobbery the like of which I have never seen equalled. Let it not be thought that I am not a Walkleyite. I admired this charming writer and most discerning critic when he was alive, and recently I have taken to admiring him more than ever. If Walkley's essays do not live, the fault will be either with posterity or because he forgot to write about motor cars and aeroplanes, in which direction it seems to me that the human mind is now singly travelling. Walkley was a great man in his little way, and has, I venture

to think, been forgotten too soon. But there is no doubt that he was a snob, as a single sentence will sufficiently prove: "M. Morand has wandered over London from Ebury Street to the confines of Epping Forest, from Upper Tooting to the route of motor bus No. 19, which (he asserts) takes you to Islington." Unlike Mr Walkley, I know where Brixton is and what bus takes you there. I know, for instance, that you pass—that is if you approach Brixton from the polite world—a hostelry called The Three Stags, and the altogether delightful Lambeth Public Baths and Wash Houses. You have not to be long in the delightful suburb before you realise that Brixton is a place sufficient unto itself. If Brixton is obviously for the Brixtonians, it is equally obvious that the Brixtonians are content with Brixton. I would even say that the owner of any one of Brixton's captivating villas is farther from London than a householder in, say Kettering, for the latter is always dreaming of coming up to town and the former never thinks about town at all. For the Brixtonian, Brixton is clearly the hub of the universe. There is a large railway bridge which bears to the Brixton landscape the same relationship that St Paul's bears to Cheapside. But I am convinced that the Brixtonians regard their railway bridge as a thing in itself and serving no purpose save the ornamental. That trains should use that bridge to convey people to other parts of the world seems unthinkable. There is no other part of the world that matters.

These things being so, it was obvious that Brixton must be provided with a cinema equal to any of those which, if the words of travellers might be believed, had been erected on the other side of the big river. But what Brixton wants, Brixton has, and that was why we alighted at a building which was certainly much less of an eyesore than, for example, the Regal Picture Palace, the exterior of which I take to be the biggest blot on the new London landscape. At the same time the architect has made a great mistake in despising the side street down which half his building runs. For this side street, which has no façade, is just as visible as the main Stockwell Road which is plentifully bedizened, with the result that the visitor receives the impression of a building only two-thirds completed. Inside, of course, completion has done her utmost. In the entrance-hall there is a running fountain in whose basin may be seen, disporting themselves, gold-fish, numbering, as Mr Belloc used to say in the old war days, more than fifteen and less than thirty. Marble stairs, lusciously carpeted, lead the giddy visitor into an auditorium alleged to resemble an Italian garden. Stars twinkle; fronds fan the fevered forehead, and, what is more important, the seats are admirably

cushioned. The place is one of extraordinary, almost Babylonish magnificence. Tea-lounges abound. There are cubicles where the jaded shopper may repose ; and wherever marble has a right to be, there marble is. The Directors, whose mobile, eager, and pleasantly aquiline features decorate the handsome souvenir with which the management presents you, have obviously not demanded any change out of their capital expenditure of £250,000 and will be satisfied, I imagine, with a return of something like 1000 per cent on their money. I am not very good at figures, but the house holds over four thousand people at prices from sixpence to three shillings and sixpence, and there are three performances a day, at all of which up to now the house has been crowded out. Well, that is good business, but not better than such enterprise deserves. I guessed correctly the number of charwomen employed, to which must be added twenty-four brass-cleaners. I was, however, £8000 out in my estimate of the organ. The instrument would appear even to the unskilled as a noble one, and fit for the performance in the best cinema manner of pieces written for the piccolo, pianoforte, and every instrument except the organ. On the afternoon that I attended, Mr Pattman played a selection from "Peer Gynt," which I shall say, with bated breath, needs that drama to jog it along. But the reasons why I intend to be outrageously and unfairly favourable to his picture palace are, first, that it has not wholly gone over to the talkies ; and second, that it has retained a first-class orchestra, the excellence of which has been made possible by the poltroonery and short-sightedness of those West End houses which have dismissed their orchestras. It is true that there was a talkie on that afternoon, but I took advantage of this to inspect the lighting plant, the drains, and the strictly business side of the venture. The talkie being over, I saw an admirable silent film about a New York journalist. "Get your street scenery on," said that journalist to a chorus girl. "You're going up town with God's gift to literature !" But he had the sense to say it in a sub-title. While Mr Haines was delivering himself of this amiable nonsense, the first-class orchestra played Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld" Overture, Dowling's "Sleepy Valley," Montague Phillips' "Arabesque" (a piece I didn't know), "Oh, Maggie, What Have You Been Up To ? ", and if I mistake not, "The Lost Chord." And I hereby announce that in the bosom of one cinema fan there is more joy over chords that are lost than over tongues that are found.

## 15. *Piffle About Pola*

January 1, 1930.

ON A MORNING LAST WEEK, as we were training it to some golf course, my partner for the day, who had hitherto been gloomily buried in the columns of one of our more popular dailies, suddenly resumed his normal expression. Now, it is only in novels that anybody chuckles, and I do not believe that any novelist would recognise the sound even if he heard it. But granting that the operation is a mental one, I am prepared to state that Bill chuckled. "Come on," I said, "let's have it!" This is the passage which Bill then read aloud : "Pola Negri's luminous eyes veiled themselves behind her heavy lashes, and then opened again, and her face was no longer a mask of tragedy, but radiant. 'He has always loved me ; he worships me, and he never, never had the slightest intention of ever marrying anybody else.' The Polish film star, who is remaining a princess, smiled. Her ruby lips parted over pearl-like teeth. She laid her head with its wealth of raven hair on the orange cushions of her sofa, and spoke in musical Polish. Her handsome young husband kissed her passionately, and left the room." "Topping!" I said. "But then Beachcomber's always first-class." Bill looked grave. "It isn't Beachcomber," he said quietly. "It's the front page."

Well, it is to be presumed that there are people who are passionately interested in Miss Negri's connubial permutations and combinations ; otherwise there would be no question of the front page. Am I right in wondering whether this curiosity is not a wholly feminine trait ? I think it is Molière who observes that curiosity is the passion for learning something which we really do not want to know. If Molière is right in his definition, then in using "curiosity" to express this feminine pre-occupation I am using the wrong word, when there is no doubt that all women are passionately preoccupied to the extent of insisting to know all about the polarities of Pola. So I shall just say that the fascination is feminine. But men are different, or so I suppose. I adore, in the cant phrase, Greta Garbo ; but I have no desire to know whether she is married or to whom, how luminous her eyes are in private life, or how musical her tongue, or whether before he leaves the room some Swede

does or does not passionately kiss her. I more than adore Janet Gaynor, but am completely indifferent to her sex life, if any.

Brigitte Helm is a great actress and I am quite indifferent as to whether she uses a knife to eat pickled onions with, or to stab a lover. In other words, I possess and indulge the singular fancy for regarding artists as artists. But women are different. I am told that a woman, when she goes to the theatre, imagines herself to be the heroine of the piece, and does indeed undergo, throughout three chocolate-munching hours, the actual process of metamorphosis. "For three glad hours, and it seems not an hour of supreme and supernal joy," she becomes, actually becomes, Saint Joan, giving her torturers as much, speaking verbally, as she gets; a second Mrs Tanqueray or a first Mrs Fraser coming to a defeatist or a victorious conclusion; a Maya getting on famously in some house of ill fame. To be these people and do these things without risk, to lead a life proscribed at Surbiton, to return home, demure of face, with a stomach full of high experience—all this it is which makes playgoing for a woman so much more soul-satisfying than it is for a man. "What did you think of Tabitha Tippet, my dear?" asks the husband who doesn't really want to know, but after all has got to make some conversation over dinner. It doesn't matter what the wife's reply is; the truth is that throughout the whole of that afternoon she did not at any time consider Miss Tippet's performance. What she did consider was the fun of being Maya, of submitting to the passionate kisses of Mediterranean mariners, and of winding up as a martyr meandering, moaning, and maudlin from Marseilles into a Seventh Heaven, where she would once more become a little girl and wear white muslin. As in the theatre, so in the films. The female film fan knows and cares nothing about film acting. It is upon her own reluctant eyelids that she feels the hot breath of Wallace or Noah Beery; it is her own chaste nostrils which seek to avoid the over-long nose of John Gilbert; it is her frail body which is crushed to the bosom of Charles Farrell. The female film fan is not one of your

Pale primroses,  
That die unmarried, ere they can behold  
Bright Phœbus in his strength, a malady  
Most incident to maids.

Your picture-palace Perdita can never die unmarried who has beheld Ronald Colman in a dinner-jacket. And I believe that the same sort of difference continues to exist as between the sexes when the film is over.

Every woman who goes to the cinema, therefore, continues to be 'Pola Negri in her private adventures as well as in her tamer histrionic affairs. At a given moment she, too, became the Princess Mdivani. She, too, went through torrents of jealousy when the prince dallied with that Miss McCormick who went about Chicago publicly announcing that she was engaged to Prince Serge Mdivani, and would marry him as soon as he got his divorce. The film fan cannot get Pola out of her mind, for is she not herself Pola ? "The rich soft voice wavered an instant." This lovely sentence is in her voice as she asks her husband to more pudding. But what she is wondering does not concern pudding or her husband's appetite ; what she really wonders is whether her voice is as rich and soft as Pola's, and whether when it wavers, it wavers quite so glamorously. If it doesn't, it must be made to. Surely some M. Marcel must have invented permanent wavers for the voice ? But there is one thing in this difficult subject which exercises me. Do the newspapers, when they print this appalling tosh, reflect what is already in the feminine mind, or do they fill that mind with rubbish which it would not of itself entertain ?

## 16. Towards Conversion

January 29, 1930.

PEOPLE ARE REALLY EXTRAORDINARY. The other day I happened, by some inexplicable fluke, to be present at one of those dinner-parties of which one reads in novels. It was a stag-party ; all round about me were men looking supremely conscious of having made the Empire what it is. Enormously impressed, I told a regrettably flippant friend about this, who promptly remarked that he would have preferred to dine with women who made the old Empire what it was. But to resume, as one who is never lacking in taste would say. You know the kind of men by whom I was surrounded—the bronzed elephant hunter with the eye of a hawk, the retired general who has made a distinguished mess of things on the North-west Frontier, the unretiring politician of the "shoot-'em-down" type, the elderly financier who is mean about cabs, the man of science with the bulging forehead, the gross feeder with the bulging waistcoat, the thin, spare man who knows about the

bank-rate, the great writer who will never be famous, the scribbling nonentity, and the middle-aged man whose name you don't catch, but whom everybody calls Bill. Probably a duke. Presently the subject of the films cropped up, and straight away I came upon an extraordinary thing. This was the fact that every man present had visited the talkies once, and found them abominable from the point of view of sound reproduction. It appeared that each man had paid his little visit to them at their very inception, and I was amazed that it had not occurred to any one of these intelligences that the faults alleged by them against the talkies were questions of matter only and not of mind. It had not occurred to them that they were condemning the talkies for the same reasons which led people to condemn the early motor car. But even far-flung men of Empire can be made to listen to reason if you peg at them long enough—say for the length of a cigar and a half. And about one o'clock in the morning I got them to agree that if mechanical imperfections had not already been conquered, they would be. What about the quality of the stuff reproduced perfectly, or imperfectly, I then asked them? Here, again, I found extraordinary unanimity. Not one man present had any objection to vulgarity as such; all the objections centred in the fact that the vulgarities being disseminated were not British vulgarities. Nobody had any objection to the vulgarising of the youthful English mind; it was the Americanising of our infants which stuck in these eminent gills.

A few evenings later I was at a party of a totally different kind. The scene of it was one of the loneliest inns in Wales. The little house in question is situated at the top of what must be one of the loneliest mountain passes in Great Britain. There is no other habitation for miles, and on that bitter night there appeared to be no neighbours nearer than the stars glittering with unusual splendour in the intensely cold air. We had not intended to pull up, but as my friend's car swung noiselessly round the corner, we heard through the little pane of glass serving as window for the bar parlour the ineluctable strains of a fox-trot new in London yesterday. Now it is all very well talking about the anxiety of the Londoner to get away from London. That anxiety is nothing compared with the frenzy with which he desires to get back to it. At the sound of Jack Dotty's Band, my friend and I scrambled out. Inside the inn we found a crowd of miners and shepherds, gamekeepers and poachers, while the ladies of the party, from the hostess downwards, were of the hard-bitten, Hardy-esque variety. Fearing that I should be accused of exaggerating, I shall not say how many couples took the

floor in that room eight feet by six, which, as everybody knows, is the size of a bedroom carpet. I am no dancer, and so spent the next hour or two drinking beer with one hand, and with the other changing the records on a machine which required winding up twice for every disc. I was relieved from this task only when it pleased the B.B.C. to desist from discussing the Manners and Morals of the Ptarmigan, the Conjugation of Spanish Verbs, and the Latest Peruvian Contribution to the Theory of Earthquakes, and turn to what is alleged to be its normal business—that of providing dance music. Let me say here that at whatever may be the closing time in Wales, the wassail-bowls disappeared, to be replaced by steaming mugs of cocoa. Presently dancing ceased and we fell to conversation about modern miracles. It appeared that among us was an old poacher who lived in a moorland cabin and whose unlawful supply of rabbits and other game was winked at by the local landowner, of whom the poacher was alleged to be the foster or some other kind of brother. The old hermit, it appeared, could do anything with two bits of stick, anything from making a fire to tickling trout. And it appeared, too, that out of more or less the same material he had built himself a wireless set. He informed us that he was saving up his rare pennies against the time when there should be such things as cinemas for the home, and he was looking forward confidently to the time when pictures would be thrown direct from the studio on to a screen the other side of which would be occupied in keeping out the wind from the Irish Sea. I shall not enlarge upon the possibility which this old boy's talk conjured up, a possibility which fills one with either rejoicing or alarm, the possibility that "the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world" is about to be achieved not by holiness but by Hollywood. That is why I hold it to be essential that we should wage war in its most horrible form on any and every kind of vulgarity, whether it be American or our dear old English sort.

In the meantime let me return to the film called *Flight* at the Capitol. This film seems to me to be ideal in every respect. The story and the whole production enthralled me, as only a very fine play and very fine acting can do. For two hours I entirely forgot the medium—that is to say, I was hardly conscious as to whether I was sitting in a theatre proper or in a picture palace. In other words, I was living with the people on the screen just as when the acting is perfect one lives with people on the stage. No nonsense was talked in the film, and all the sense was spoken beautifully. So far, indeed, has sound reproduction improved that the love passages, which were few and not imbecile,

came over *pianissimo*. I should like to say here that the moment all talkies become as good as *Flight*, I shall become their most ardent champion.

## 17. *Bravo, the British!*

March 5, 1930.

BRAVO, EUSTREE ! Bravo, Mr Hitchcock ! Bravo, the Irish Players ! And bravo, Mr Edward Chapman ! British International Pictures Ltd. and these fine artists have between them put together one of the most remarkable films that it has ever been anybody's pleasure to see. Just as *Elstree Calling* was, in my view, unmitigated footle, which would have bored an infants' school, so *Juno and the Paycock* appears to me to be very nearly a masterpiece. It would be quite a masterpiece but for the fact of our consciousness throughout that what we are witnessing has not been conceived as a film but is a photographed play. I do not think that this matters very much, and in any case audiences which have not seen the play may not have this consciousness. But I desire to say, and to say with all possible emphasis, that here is a film which completely justifies the talkies. I have frequently made the point that there can be no more sense in hating the talkies than in hating the Atlantic Ocean. They are here and in full tide and cannot be stemmed. Since people invariably mis-hear when one speaks at the top of one's voice, let me say, in the teeniest and even weeniest whisper, that all I have ever disliked about the talkies is the imbecilities they have talked. Drivel's dregs is not too harsh a phrase to describe those pictures uniquely pursuant of the chorus girl's approach to, and retreat from, seduction. Sleeping and waking, I loathe these pictures, designed apparently for the edification of nursemaids, mannequins, Nippies, steeplejacks, butcher boys, and the University Blues. But when I come across a magnificent thing like *Juno and the Paycock*, I am going to like it in as loud a voice as I dislike the rubbish. There was once a statuesque lady who was so far an actress that she was accustomed in the Drury Lane pantomimes to hold lamps at the feet of staircases. She had at one time married into the peerage but had soon turned from her noble though occasionally drunken spouse. "It was always that way in our family," she said.

"When we cleave, we cleave ; and when we turn, we turn." When I loathe, I loathe ; and when I like, I like. I like "Juno" enormously. ^

Perhaps something more serious about this film may not be out of place. Three-quarters of a century ago Henry Morley made the discovery that the English temper jibs at undiluted tragedy. Whether for good or ill, the English audience, says Morley, has a habit of looking out for something upon which to feed its appetite for the absurd. The orthodox writer of melodrama satisfies that hunger with a comic under-plot, and by so doing "saves his terrors whole." It is impossible, I suggest, to imagine an Englishman taking his wife and family to a State theatre on a Sunday afternoon to follow the humourless progress of "Polyeucte" and "Heraclius," "Bajazet" and "Mithridates." We are not built that way, and Shakespeare knew it when he gave Lear his Fool and wrote in the porter's scene in "Macbeth." Morley was writing of the theatre, but I shall use his concluding sentence, only substituting the word "film" for "play" : "There must be a deeper earnestness than films can demand, in whatever serious thing Englishmen are to look at without exercise of that sense of the humorous which is part of their life ; so natural a part that every man in every grade of society is regarded as a bore who lacks it ; and the very phrase with thousands even among our educated men for not finding a thing acceptable is 'seeing no fun' in it." "Juno and the Paycock" is as much a tragedy as "Macbeth," but it is a tragedy taking place in the porter's family. Mr O'Casey's extraordinary knowledge of English taste—that he wrote his play for the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, is not going to be allowed to disturb my argument—is shown by the fact that the tragic element in it occupies, at the most, some twenty minutes, and that for the remaining two hours and a half the piece is given up to gorgeous and incredible fooling. The same proportion between tragedy and comedy is retained in the film. "Juno," it should perhaps be explained here, is a woman of the Dublin slums, born, courted, and married in the month of June ; her husband is called "The Paycock" because he prefers taking the floor of a public house in strutting magnificence to doing a day's work. The tragedy that befalls their son and daughter is felt in repercussion by the mother, and not at all by the father. The daughter's affair is comparatively commonplace. She is courted by the lawyer's clerk who brings the news of the family's sudden prosperity, and is at once abandoned by him when that prosperity proves chimerical. The son's tragedy is conditioned by the drama's place and time. The scene is a tenement house

in Dublin, and the time is 1922, during the fighting between the Free Staters and the Republican Die-Hards.

There are some tremendous moments in this film, and the comforting of the terrified boy by his mother has extraordinary poignancy. The scene in which the boy who had informed against a comrade is himself taken out to be shot, is the most moving thing I have ever seen in any cinema. The play, we remember, ended with the return to his lodging of the Paycock, intoxicated, and unconscious of his son's death and the flight of his wife and daughter. This ironic close is the work of a master, and it seemed rather a pity that Mr Hitchcock did not use it, preferring to end his film on the note of Juno's grief. Perhaps Mr Hitchcock was right. Irony is a little thing to submit to a film audience, and probably this admirable film producer has chosen wisely in ending on a safe note.

Of the acting of the Irish Players in this film it is hardly necessary to say anything, for Miss Sara Allgood as Juno and Mr Sydney Morgan as Joxer are every whit as good on the screen as they are on the stage. Miss Maire O'Neill is excellent, too, though a little inclined in the early scenes to speak away from the camera. I confess that I looked forward with some trepidation to the performance of any actor who should succeed Mr Sinclair as the Paycock. There are some parts which some actors play so magnificently that they make them their own to the extent that any other actor's playing is mere encroachment and usurpation. Irving's Mathias, Coquelin's Tartuffe, Edward Terry's Dick Phenyl—but the list is a long one. Mr Sinclair's Paycock belongs to this category of the undivorceable. This knowledge must have weighed heavily upon Mr Edward Chapman, who nevertheless gives a heroic performance and one to be seen with pleasure and profit even by those who most admire Mr Sinclair. It only remains to say that the voice reproduction is perfect throughout, and that the audience audibly revelled in the film's humours, and was audibly moved by its heart-rending close. A magnificent British picture.

## 18. A Tootle on the Trumpet

April 30, 1930.

THIS WEEK IT IS NECESSARY that something should be said. That something concerns the film called *Journey's End*, and how the play from which it is adapted came to be a world-wide success. How exactly did this happen? There is only one person in the world who really knows, and it is unfortunate that that person cannot publish the facts without dragging himself into the limelight. However, "this eternal blazon must not be," as the ghost of Hamlet's father said. But ghosts are notoriously poor at the publicity business. There are times, too, when a man must not shrink from publicity. That old astronomic bore, the watcher of the skies, does not keep him mum when some new planet makes its fish-like appearance, *i.e.* swims into his ken. He does not complain of the absence of fish. He does not even cry "Stale fish!" What he does is to raise a whoop of joy, proclaim that he has bagged a whale, and risk fame coming to him as an expert angler. I am going to risk obloquy by saying straight out that if it hadn't been for poor little insignificant me, "*Journey's End*" would have been a complete and utter failure. So there!

That great philosopher, Mr George Graves, has observed that no steak-and-kidney pie can be considered a real success unless it contains at least one bit of kidney. By the same process of reasoning I shall assume that no statement can be considered really proved unless the matter of that statement can adduce at least one little bit of evidence. Very well, then. I was standing at the corner of the street watching a crowd of thin, lank, bespectacled intellectuals fighting listlessly to get into the Stage Society's *matinée* of "*Journey's End*." "Coming?" asked my friend, George Bishop. "Hell, yes!" I replied, wishing that the Stage Society would go and bury its head in the sand like the Phoenix. At five o'clock I emerged, feeling all the enthusiasm that Bishop looked. Let it be said here with some conviction that I do not believe and never have believed "*Journey's End*" to be a major work of genius. I should always have hesitated to compare it with, say, "*The Trojan Women*" or "*The Dynasts*." But in December 1928 I was weary of American

films showing how the war centred in some Flanders flapper. At this Bow time the makers of war films attempted little beyond drawing Clara at a venture. "Journey's End" did something more. It showed us a number of credible people engaged in a credible way in the incredible business of war. Now for some secret history. In the foyer Bishop and I met three of the best-known London theatre managers, men who would not jib at finding £20,000 of somebody else's money for a show to be called "Pink Shrimps." Bishop and I took these three managers by their six ears ; in fact, we took quite a handful of ears. We both pointed to the dazed and staggered audience. Then I appealed to their better selves, and was enlarging upon the play's merits, when Bishop gently remarked that a £5 note would cover the production, and that nobody in the cast was, so to speak, anybody. The three managers shook their long ears and said simply that the play was too good for the beastly, rotten public. They had, they said, had some before. Upon which cryptic utterance Bishop and I took our leaves, not without a touch of asperity. "Bless and fondle them !" I said. "However, it's my turn on the wireless to-night, and I'll just give them socks." "Don't forget the public," said Bishop. "Give them a bit of it, too." I did. I tore up the talk which I had so carefully prepared, and in hot haste I scribbled down an account of the play which I had that afternoon seen on the stage. I told the public that this was "a marvellous play." It wasn't, and it isn't, being no more than an extremely sincere piece of good and clever craftsmanship. But in a world in which everybody shrieks, the normal conversational tone has ceased to be any good. I went on to describe the interview with the three managers, and how if the managers had had any confidence or ground for confidence in the public, they would not have turned down this play. "And so," I concluded, "you see what comes of not going to good plays and of flocking to 'Tickling Topsy.'" But this mild bombshell was nothing in comparison with the one I dropped a fortnight later on hearing that Mr Maurice Browne had bought the play. It was again a case of "me for the mike." I then said that Mr Browne was a complete ass, that if he put £10,000 into the play he would lose it, and that if he put up fivepence he would lose that sum also. I begged to inform the public that it was completely unworthy of the treat which Mr Browne proposed to offer it, that I had told Mr Browne this, and advised him to take the play off after the dress rehearsal and before the first performance. Deliberately and for full fifteen minutes I taunted listeners with every conceivable kind of insult, and so successfully that next day I received scores of abusive letters

concluding with some such postscript as : " To prove you are wrong, I have taken seven tickets for the second night." The next day I received more abusive letters with postscripts saying that tickets had been taken for the fourth night as the writers couldn't get in earlier ! The cold, calm, astonishing truth is that the public was goaded and stung into taking an immediate interest in this play. That's all, and it's enormous. The average female, the morning after a new musical comedy has been produced, says to her husband : " My dear, you really must get tickets for 'Waddling Ducks.' There's a wonderful scene in which Leslie Henson shuts up like an umbrella ! " But when a good play is produced the same female, seeing no mention of frocks, turns to " To-day's Recipe." Females rule the theatre, and I know by my post-bag that it is the women who listen in. Hang it, they must listen sometimes. In the normal way they would have commanded tickets for " Journey's End " when they couldn't get them for anything else and after three weeks. And in three weeks it would have been dead.

Now there is no merit in all this. Nobody can boost a bad play, and this play was good enough to run when once it had got a start. And in the theatre the start is ninety-nine hundredths of the battle. Without the thousands of wireless listeners who bombarded the box-office before the Press got busy, this play must have failed. I have proof that it was wireless listeners who provided the audience during those first and, in the case of a really good play, generally fatal three weeks. I don't want any thanks from anybody, but I do want the facts known, and so far there has not been the smallest whisper about them. I am not offended or surprised. Nor do I imagine that Mr James Whale, who so brilliantly produced both the play and the film, is surprised or offended that his name should be omitted from the Tivoli programme. That is the way of theatre and film. Having stated the facts, I propose to return contentedly to my normal obscurity, merely stating that *Journey's End* is the best film considered as the photograph of a play I have ever seen, that it is more moving than the play, that it has been transferred to the screen with the greatest possible tact and discretion, that Mr Colin Clive gives a stupendous performance, and that nobody else in the film is better than middling.

## 19. "Journey's End" Again

May 7, 1930.

"I'M NOT ARGUING; I'm just telling you!" The phrase will be familiar. Last week I did not argue as to how or why "Journey's End" as a play became a success. I merely, and I hope modestly, told the listening earth the facts. Let me now return to the subject of the film. This seems to me to be better than the play if only for the reason that it is more real. Seen in the theatre, that dug-out did not seem a very uncomfortable sort of place. To begin with, the furniture in it was paid for, an enormous consideration to anybody who lives under the permanent cloud of the hire-purchase system! Personally, I would far sooner live in Stanhope's apartment than in any of the seaside variety. Then again, it hardly seemed a place of danger. One did not visualise—or at least I did not—the complete desolation which began at the top of the stairs. There is one shot in the film showing an expanse of liquid mud with a bit of a tree and some broken railings sticking out of it which brings home to me the horrid reality of the whole business. When, in the theatre, they talked of a raid and of bringing in the German prisoner, I am afraid I did not realise anything more than a pleasant skirmish on some smiling golf-links and hiking somebody out of a bunker. A skirmish in which one might get killed, but still a pleasant one. I certainly did not visualise the dragging of the fellow back through seas of mud and slime. This may only serve to show my inexpertness as a playgoer and expose the fact that I have none of those actual experiences which the incident must have revived for those who possess them. But there it is. In other words, war as presented in the play seemed to be on the whole a gallant, heroic business, whereas the film shows war as the essentially foul, beastly thing that it is in reality.

There was one curious fact about the last war which, I cannot help thinking, has never been sufficiently underlined; the fact that whereas what one might call the business end of it was the vilest torture which the mind of man can know, the preparation and training for it constituted, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the happiest time of a man's life. I am reminded of a passage which proves the latter half of

this statement up to the hilt. It occurs in something which was intended to be a war book, and I make no apology for transcribing it since it represents a frame of mind in which war, the intolerable thing, is embraced with gusto by those who know nothing of it: "There are occasions when the least introspective of us must take stock of his sentimental position. An evening on Salisbury Plain in war-time is one of them. Men are here from all the ends of the Empire for all sorts of reasons. Some for the 'sweet punishment of their enemies,' some that they may be 'honourably avenged,' some for the adventure, some through the loss of their jobs, some hating it, some unutterably bored, many inspired, a few who will never find their feet, but not one, so far as I can gather, who would turn back if he could. 'Man comes into life to seek and find his sufficient beauty, to serve it, to win and increase it, to fight for it, to face anything and bear anything for it, counting death as nothing so long as the dying eyes still turn to it. And fear and dullness and indolence and appetite—which, indeed, are no more than fear's three crippled brothers—who make ambushes and creep by night, are against him, to delay him, to hold him off, to hamper and beguile and kill him in that quest.' This is neither Ecclesiastes nor yet Bunyan, but a great living novelist. This passage seems to me worthy to be printed on a little card and served out to every soldier with his pay book. Each of us here surely has his 'sufficient beauty.' It may be a family tie or a grand passion, an art or a friendship, a religion or even an ideal of politics. At the last it may be love of country. What each man's 'sufficient beauty' may be, it is no man's business to inquire. Enough that each man here is ready to fight and to face and to dare for it, and is already putting dullness and fear, appetite and indolence behind him. . . . It is dark, the stars are out, a sentry passes calmly a hundred feet away. The camp is silent save for the distant din of trivial tunes on trivial instruments, the soldier's evening melody. In the next hut the regimental sergeant-major is twanging a mandolin, the companion of many years. Farther down the lines a gramophone is sentimentalising 'Johnny O'Morgan with his little mouth-organ playing Home, Sweet Home,' and from half a dozen huts, in all manner of keys, resounds the ever popular 'Keep the Home Fires Burning.' Even that most mannerless of unlicked cubs, young Jones, is making the officers' mess melancholy with his untrained, beautiful voice and sentimental air. And I know that unto each man in this camp, from the waster in the ranks to the least heeding sub., there is a 'sufficient beauty.' In that faith we leave these shores to-morrow."

When I wrote that passage I believed every word of it. But what, pray, has it to do with lying in the open with one or more bullets through one's stomach? Even after the event we find a writer of so finely tempered a mind as Mr Desmond MacCarthy writing :

No treatment of the war could satisfy which did not treat it as the most abominable calamity ; at the same time, no treatment would be true which ignored the noble qualities it called into existence, or the emotions worth having it created ; precious unstable relationships, moments of blazing exaltation, halcyon moments of rest and gaiety, of profound and easy affection. Yet, having written even that sentence, true though it is, one feels the meanness of glorying in a cross which others have borne.

Mr MacCarthy sees all round the difficulty. To speak frankly, I know that I shall never again enjoy or taste life as I enjoyed and tasted it in those long six summer months of 1915, when existence was one long picnic on Salisbury Plain, in the dales of Yorkshire, and on the Wiltshire Downs. Yet I have no illusions whatever about what the upshot might have been. How can one who has not the nerve to drive a motor car believe that any kind of compulsion could have got him over the top of a trench? This is why I welcome all war books, and the more horrible, the better. "The paths of glory lead but to the grave." Precisely. Fathers and mothers in all countries should be made aware of the sickening realities of war, and of the horrible, unheroic nature of some of its graves. General Crozier has described an execution for cowardice. But what he has not told us is that the lad who was hanged on the butcher's hook entered the war with as noble and high a courage as the rest. None of us slinks into battle. Some can stand it when they get there, and some can't. And I hold *Journey's End* to be better as a film than as a play, because it begins to give an indication of that filth from which the glamour is not even yet departed.

## 20. "All Quiet on the Western Front."

June 25, 1930.

AN EXTRAORDINARY THING HAS HAPPENED. But before I relate what it is I must ask the reader to bear with me in a personal matter. People are constantly saying to me : " You write beautifully. But, of course, you are always wrong ! " To which my invariable answer is : " I don't write beautifully, and that's the whole trouble. *But I haven't been wrong since 1919—and then there was a doubt !*" Some critics have difficulty in deciding what their views are. Up to the present, or rather up till last night, I have never believed that the difficulty could really exist. I have always known what I thought ; the difficulty was to put it into words. Then, last night, I went to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the film which has captured the imagination of all my colleagues and of the town generally. I went hoping and expecting to be tremendously moved, and to my great horror found that I was hardly moved at all, the whole momentum of the film being, so far as I was concerned, intellectual rather than emotional. Yet this is the place to say that round about me people were more moved than I can ever remember in a cinema before, some even having to leave the theatre. Up to now my method of criticism has been this : to let play or film have its way with me and to record honestly what I have honestly felt without any discountings or allowances. But lately some extraordinary things have been happening. In " *Sainte Jeanne*," that play in which there is not a tear, Madame Pitoëff made me weep for an hour and a half on end ; as Marguerite Gummidge, or whatever Dumas's heroine was called, she left me completely dry-eyed. In an abominable and recent war piece Miss Mary Clare devastated me utterly. This film did not begin to have the effect of *Mons*, *Four Sons*, or even the film version of *Journey's End*. Yet I know that this Remarque film is a much bigger business than the last-mentioned, and that all that there is in Mr Sherriff's compact, workmanlike little piece could be tucked away in single chapters of Remarque. The one is an episode ; the other an epic. I remember how

and when and where I read "All Quiet." It was last summer during a holiday trip down the Mediterranean. And I remember that the book was so unbearably painful that I kept diluting it with bits of "Saki," for otherwise I could not have read it at all. Just before I went into the Regal the other night a friend said, "Come and have a whiskey. You'll need it!" I didn't accept, holding it better pluck to take my horrors neat. I had read of the terrific realism of this film and didn't find it.

There was a picture in the Imperial War Museum which showed in the foreground a soldier who had been dead some weeks. There is a fearful description in Mr A. P. Herbert's "The Secret Battle" of some men who had been dead only a few hours. Both that picture and that passage have haunted me ever since. And I was surprised to find nothing so—shall I say?—disconcerting in *All Quiet*. One saw many men killed. After which they appeared to vanish. For the film does not show so much as a dead horse lying about. I suppose I expected to receive at least the impression of what must be the most sickening thing in war—its dreadful stench. There is a passage in some other war book in which a soldier describes his horror when first he felt the ground give beneath his feet, and discovered that he was treading not upon earth but upon a dead man. There is nothing of this in the present film. Some preliminary literature informed me that "never has spectacle and stark realism of war been more thrillingly conveyed." I beg to differ. The single view of the war-scape in *Journey's End* was in my view more drear than anything in *All Quiet*. My disappointment began as soon as I realised that the soldiers in the film were not young Germans torn from their homes, but admirable film actors magnificently entrenched at Hollywood. Paul is excellently played by Mr Lewis Ayres. But the pretence that he is a German must surely vanish when you hear him say: "He wants me to wear my uniform around." Katczinsky should be a unique figure and have his whole being in Remarque's pages and nowhere else. But he is played by Mr Louis Wolheim, and inasmuch as Mr Wolheim is one of my favourite film actors becomes the less Katczinsky. It is a fine performance but it has many overtones and echoes which have nothing to do with Remarque. One of the most pathetic passages in modern literature is the long agony of Kemmerich, who, you remember, lingers day after day, his face growing yellower and yellower and more and more gaunt, while the others wait for his bed and his boots. Mr Ben Alexander plays him well. Which does not prevent the dying Kemmerich from being an extremely healthy, well-nourished actor, perishing in the full flush of youth and the

limelight. The alleged romantic episode of the canal is pure film-bunk and moved me not at all, while some of the book's notable passages of exquisiteness and horror—the visit to hospital of the wounded sergeant's wife and the prison-camp scene—are omitted.

Is it possible that I have been seeing too many plays and too many films recently, and that the emotions have their saturation point? Throughout the film my mind kept telling me that this and that were being admirably done, and I was always conscious of the complete and successful avoidance of wrong notes. I can even conceive that, in other moods, the canal episode might have been touching. I expounded my difficulty to a friend, asking him whether after three Hamlets, an Othello, a Fedyá, a St Joan, a Marguerite Gautier, and half a dozen minor assaults, the capacity for emotion may not be temporarily exhausted. "You can't eat ten banquets on end," I said. "Of course you can't," replied my friend. "But you ought to be able to tell by the look whether it's a good meal." My friend was right, and on his reasoning and on reflection, I pronounce *All Quiet on the Western Front* to be one of the best films ever made—though I did not at the time feel it to be so. The scenes of mess and muddle, the fighting and, above all, the panic of the soldiers, were admirably portrayed. There was just one point at which, I confess, the film did "get" me. That was the incident of the calling-up of the children, the boys of fifteen, at the very end of the war. Excellent, too, was the passage towards the end in which Katczinsky, wandering about the countryside on a summer afternoon, was killed, so to speak, needlessly. This is not the first time that that note has been struck. Ten years before Remarque's book somebody wrote a novel called "Responsibility," which ended: "Rodd never saw his book. Shortly before it appeared he was killed, stupidly, unheroically, unnecessarily even, carrying a bucket." The end of the film is first-class. I think, on consideration, that its essential weakness lies in the fact that its *motif* is Paul's disillusion, which cannot be filmed. After all, the only way of dramatising Hamlet's indecision was to show the violences which pointed it. Mr Lewis Milestone, the director, has done well by *All Quiet*. But the essence of his job was to film certain violences and leave us to deduce Paul's disillusion. Possibly I was not in a very good mood for making these deductions. And I again repeat that I have never known an audience to be so deeply and, I would say, so discriminately moved. I think what is really the matter with this film is that it insists upon being a talkie, which means, of course, realistic dialogue infinitely trivial in comparison with the scope of the picture as a whole. Silence

the babble and raise the same events to significance through music from the great masters, and I believe I should be completely moved.

## 21. *A Marvellous Film*

*July 2, 1930.*

"THE FATE OF THE BALLOON," said Dr Johnson, "I do not much lament; to make new balloons is to repeat the feat again. We now know a method of mounting into the air *and, I think, are not likely to know more*. . . . The first experiment, however, was bold and deserved applause and reward. But since it has been performed and its event is known, I had rather now find a medicine that can ease an asthma." The italics are mine. What would the Doctor have said if he had known that four fliers in a monoplane left Ireland last night and are now, as I write, somewhere between Newfoundland and New York? Courage of this type is a kind of thing I find it completely impossible to understand. The tragedy of Segrave is fresh in everybody's mind. Last week a young English motor-racer cheerfully risked his life in an endeavour to make the pace too hot for the leading German car and so make the race safe for another Englishman. Then there is the case of the four young men who, when these lines are in print, will have either perished or have won imperishable renown. Natural poltroon that I am, I can only account for these dare-devils on the assumption that for them no devils exist to be dared. I can understand an organism which knows not fear. The difficulty is to understand putting on one side such an amount of fear as in the normal case would be involved. "Who's afraid? Here goes!" is an intelligible pronouncement. "Who's afraid? I am. Hellishly. And I'm not going!" is another intelligible pronouncement. But to be afraid like hell and still take the plunge. . . . Well, that I suppose is the real definition of heroism, and it is only generous to suppose that at heart this is the stuff of which our heroes are made. People tell me that some definite purpose is served by the projection of masses of ironmongery across sands from one chunk of seaweed to another, upon the bosoms of placid lakes, and through the air. It may be so, just as it was said that the Derby and the St Leger improve the breed of artillery horses and light vanners. "Thank

Heaven," a wit once said, "nobody pretends that gambling improves the breed of cards." I do not believe that when our experimentalists mount into the cockpits of aeroplanes or the driving seats of racing motor cars they care anything at all about accelerating transatlantic transport or increasing the reliability of motor omnibuses. I believe they do it for the fun of the thing. Take climbers. I do not believe that people climb the Matterhorn to know at what height the chamois can keep itself warm, eggs can still be boiled, or violets blow. I do not believe that any purpose of any kind would be achieved by the conquest of Mount Everest. I believe that these people hang on to avalanches by their eyelashes for the sheer enjoyment they get out of it.

I myself have no head for heights. Mountains terrify me, as do lighthouses, the upper floors of big hotels, every form of human exerie. I would not inhabit New York, that inferno of the somnambulist, for a Labour leader's ransom. I cannot even suffer the gallery at the theatre. How fearful and dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low ! Methinks the actors seem no bigger than their heads. I always feel that in some fit of auto-hypnotism, some attack of sheer funk if you will, I shall throw my opera-glasses into the pit and myself after them, in desperate retrieval. Yet climbers' books delight me, and the subject finds me full of lore. I believe I could hold my own in a mountaineer's talk by the mountain inn fire, that is if I were sure of returning to town on the following morning. I am as familiar with some of the most famous climbs in the British Isles as though I had been up them. I know the maximum angle at which snow will lie, the etiquette of the mountain, the danger of grass slopes, the difference between the French and English meanings of the word "Alpinist." I read every book about mountaineering that I can get hold of, and yet tremble at the ascent of Snowdon from Llanberis. The spirit is willing ; it is the flesh, or at least the nerve-centre controlling fear, which is cowardly. Descents trouble me not at all. I can face with equanimity the coal-mine, the submarine, the downward escalators at our Tube stations. But I am diffident about the return journey and would rather travel a stage or two beyond, say, to Hampstead, where there is a lift so long that one has time to get friendly with it ! "Facilis descensus Averno" was evidently written by a man with a poor head.

*The White Hell of Pitz Palu* is an astonishing and, to me, wildly terrifying film which I could only sit through by gripping the spectator on either side of me, to the surprise of one and the annoyance of the other. The film began with a story of Mr and Mrs Brand who were

honeymooning half-way up some unconquered giant. This sounds incredible, though I seem to remember that the greatest of our modern dramatic critics spent his honeymoon in a sleeping-bag on the upper slopes of Mont Blanc. Half-way up Pitz Palu the Brands met a Dr Krafft who had lost his wife a year earlier when they, too, were on their honeymoon. Next day at dawn the doctor decided that he must now conquer the mountain, and Brand joined him. But does the reader think that Mrs Brand was going to be left behind? The reader will be wrong, and indeed the grey mare proved to be the best horse in the team. Terrific things happened to the trio who, half-way through the film, were left marooned on a ledge of rock in a blizzard with night descending. Such was the intrepidity of these film climbers that they had not a nip of brandy or a nibble of chocolate between them. There we left them freezing to death while we participated in the activities of the search parties. Let me soberly say that I have never known anything more wildly hair-raising than the efforts of the aviator to drop food to the adventurers and locate their exact position for the rescuers. It would be quite impossible to attempt to describe in words the horror of this little drama, and the immense grandeur and beauty of the setting in which it takes place. The piece is very well acted, though as there were no programmes I was not able to bring away with me the names of the players or even the title of the producing company. I suppose that the actors were risking their lives throughout, as was also the aviator. But unless there has been some possibility of a fake, which I do not think likely, I imagine that some dozen or so of the photographers must have perished in the recording process! The photography is marvellous throughout, and the picture is one of the most gripping I have ever sat through. The only possible point of criticism is that the accompanying music is tinned, and tinned very vilely. Apart from this the film is mercifully silent, whereby the awesomeness of Nature is preserved and at no time disturbed by the imbecilities of human speech.

## 22. Two Good Films

August 13, 1930.

THE TWO OUTSTANDING FILMS of this week have been *Raffles* at the Tivoli and *The Blue Angel* at the Regal. Presumably everybody will go to see the first film because of Mr Ronald Colman, who is, I understand, the greatest male exponent of body-urge—the new term for the old-fashioned “sex-appeal”—possessed by the modern screen. As I am not a flapper I do not know how far Mr Colman makes good the claims which are made for him; he seems to me to be a good-looking young man who probably goes in first wicket down, is scratch at golf, and would be about as interesting to talk to on any subject that mattered as a University Blue; I may be, and probably am, mistaken. For it is in the nature of things that I cannot know to what extent mindless young women desire to be enfolded in the biceps of this muscular young man. I have not much acquaintance with the art of Mr Colman, for to my knowledge I have only seen him in one other film—a piece of sentimental nonsense about Devil’s Island in which it would appear that French convicts in that settlement live a life consisting entirely of hot-towel shaves and flirtations with the Governor’s wife. Mr Colman, however, does very well as Raffles, and it would probably be ungracious to remark that the part is one in which not even a Shaftesbury Avenue leading-man has been known to fail. The film is remarkable for the appearance of Mr Fred Kerr, a most distinguished actor, in the English sense of the word. That is to say, that he has been on the stage for hundreds of years, playing hundreds of parts, and always managing to be the same character, or within a stone’s throw of it—that of a testy, well-bred, elderly man of the world with the mental outlook—Heaven help us!—of a Die-hard peer. There is a good story, which may or may not be entirely true, to the effect that Mr Kerr, on going to see Grassi and the Sicilian Players, turned to his companion, Mr Allan Aynesworth, or other self-impersonator, and said: “You know, if I chose to exert myself I could do exactly the same kind of thing!” By all the blood-vessels that temperamental actors have never broken, I hope that Mr Kerr will cherish that illusion.

to the end of his days. There is another story which I heard the other day. This concerns two old buffers of the age to remember W. G. Grace's century for the M.C.C. against the Australians in 1880. They were sitting in the pavilion at Lord's during the recent Test Match, and one suddenly leaned towards the other and said with an air of the greatest importance : " Do you know, I don't think there are as many sparrows as there were last year ! " After some time the buffer who had been addressed leaned towards the other and said : " On consideration, I don't think there are." Mr Kerr would play either of these parts perfectly, and it goes without saying that his performance in *Raffles* is as admirable as that which he gave in *The High Road* ; which is not astonishing in view of the fact that it would take critical genius of the highest order to tell one from the other.

This is where Emil Jannings scores, for he is a different Jannings every time—a thing from which every English actor would shrink with horror, and also a thing whose non-acceptance by the English actor has made the London stage the greatest bore known to civilised man. No decently bred person knows where his gorge is until he attends every London first-night, a state of affairs which I attribute to the public for being fools, to the managers for *humouring* the public—always a fatal thing to do—and to the actors for allowing themselves to be made fools of. But Jannings is an artist, and the directors of German films have hit upon or been forced to accept the extraordinary notion that an artist should be allowed to repeat his part and not himself. I admit, of course, that there is a certain sameness about all these Jannings films. The bank cashier who embezzles the bank's money and spends it on a *cocotte* who chuck's him as soon as his booty is exhausted, the keeper of the night haunt who squanders his fortune among his own girls and then dies in an avalanche of retributive snow, the schoolmaster who in *The Blue Angel* visits a low music-hall to reclaim his pupils and, falling a victim to the leading siren, embarks upon a career of shipwreck, ending at his death in his old master's seat—are not all these obviously the same formula ? But it is fair to say that this similarity is this film's only weakness, and even so it is redeemed by Jannings's power to present another man while still remaining Jannings. This marks the great actor. I shall not have space to recount the excellences of this film in detail, and therefore one incident must suffice. Jannings, dismissed from his school, marries the siren, which is the only improbability in the film, since she must know that he can now have no money. But this improbability is to be overlooked in view of what is to come. At the

wedding breakfast the music-hall proprietor, who is also a conjurer, produces eggs from the Professor's nose, whereupon his bride clucks like a hen and Jannings crows vaingloriously. In the course of his degradation the Professor sinks to be the butt of the music-hall, who must crow whenever it pleases the conjurer, now his employer, to produce his eggs. In the course of his servitude the touring company returns to the town where the Professor once taught, and before all his old students he must give his performance of fearful ignominy. He does so ; his mind breaks, and the crowing becomes that of a madman. I confess that as I watched this amazing performance I mischievously wished that I had invited Mr Fred Kerr to accompany me. For I could not help wondering whether he would have turned to me and said : "My dear Agate, I am going on the films, as you know. I have no doubt that if I choose to exert myself . . ." But everybody else in this film is extraordinarily good, including the young German scholars who, incredibly enough, do not yelp : "Say, teacher, that's O.K. with me !" The tiny part of the Headmaster of the school is played to perfection, and so is that of the music-hall proprietor. Remains only Fräulein Marlene Dietrich, as to whom I can only say that she makes Reason totter on her throne. And unless she is very careful, Greta Garbo also. But I will not be unfaithful, leastwise in print. Therefore I will only say that on the fair Greta's behalf I strongly object to the arrival of this supremely capable, superbly fascinating and exquisitely lovely actress.

## 23. *A Holiday Article*

September 3, 1930.

"WHY NOT GO ON THE 'MEGALOMANIA'?" my friend asked. "Why not?" I replied. Whereupon I wrote to my bank manager as follows : "Dear Sir,—When you receive this I shall have embarked on the 'Megalomania.' But don't be alarmed. I am getting off at Cherbourg. Ta-ta !" It is said that Oscar Wilde's epithet for the Atlantic Ocean was "disappointing." I shall use the same word to describe the "Megalomania." The boat was not exactly dirty but indescribably dingy, as though it had not been painted for years. It had been scrubbed but it

didn't sparkle, and there was a smell about the decks like that of school dormitories made ready for the beginning of term. Then the boat was so big that one lost all sense of being on a ship. It was the first time I had ever been on a really big liner, and I felt a sudden need for Mr Arnold Bennett. Only he, I mused, would know why one could not get a drink on deck at high noon when one had been liberally supplied in the train two hours before, why they only made use of two funnels out of three, where the sailors were, and why at Cherbourg they did not send out two tenders instead of one. To spend an hour watching Americans preparing to return home is one of the duller recreations. But that turned out to be liveliness itself compared with the evening we spent in Cherbourg. Has anybody ever done that before? Anyhow, about half-past nine I retired to bed with MacLaurin's "Post Mortem," and read fascinating accounts of Anne Boleyn's nymphomania, Joan of Arc's sex-repression, Gibbon's hydrocele, Pepys' stone, and Napoleon's cancer. After which I fell asleep and dreamed I had acquired the lot. Next morning our French chauffeur joined us in a car the body of which had apparently been modelled on that of an aeroplane. The young man was very proud of this and was quite offended when I pointed out that the wretched thing was hardly bigger than a good-sized mousetrap. Two stoutish Englishmen, two large bags of golf-clubs and kit, to cope with a cold snap or a heat wave, demand accommodating. I will only hint that we have already spent seven days rearranging luggage and do not yet appear to have hit upon the ideal distribution.

"*De l'audace ! Toujours de l'audace !*" said some French revolutionary worthy, at a moment when, however, his own life was not in danger. That, or something like it, seemed to be the motto of our young French chauffeur. It is a curious thing that the road manners of a nation as courteous as the French should be so inexpressibly filthy. I once knew an unfortunate devil who suffered from a quaint "compulsive neurosis," as I believe the doctors call it, like touching lamp-posts. This poor fellow could not bear to be overtaken in the street, neither could he resist the temptation to overtake every other pedestrian. The French drive their motor cars on this principle and no other. They cut in the whole time on the theory that a miss is as good as a mile, with the result that in this tiny car I can actually smell the paint on those we rush by. Nothing has overtaken us yet, and there is that about our chauffeur's ears and neck which suggests that nothing will. Nor does the condition of the roads affect the gallant fellow. How the springs stand it I don't know; in fact they don't, and at Brest it turned

out that six out of the seven *larnes de resort*—whatever that may be in English—were snapped through. Brest seemed to me to have the appearance of Liverpool and the weather of Manchester, and indeed up to this point our investigation into the nature of Brittany has proved meagre of interest and enjoyment. Are there worse greens anywhere in the world than those arid, dusty pocket-handkerchiefs of Dinard? I except, of course, the old course at Llandudno.

The Point du Raz, or Brittany's Land's End, was amusing. To begin with, it is disfigured by the most hideous hotel ever put up by a speculator, Jew or Christian. This vile construction has but one redeeming feature; it is grey-blue, whereas, of course, it might have been vermillion. Next to it are the white marble monument to the shipwrecked, and the tawdry little shops where tanned harpies bid consumptive rickety children "give Monsieur the change." This means that one gives the poor little brat something, or, if he looks ill enough, possibly abandons him the lot. (It is this constant dribble of dirty bits of paper alleged to be worth five and ten francs which makes holidaying in France so expensive a business.) My own view is that these unhealthy, moribund children are hired from Paris for the season. Of anything in the way of entertainment this part of Brittany is completely destitute. When the sun sets, you set also. Our only excitement during the past week has been to gaze at town halls into which nobody ever goes, and upon barrack squares where nobody parades, and there isn't even the fun of seeing somebody else do pack-drill. It is true that one night there was immense fuss in our hotel. Suddenly the dining-room door opened and twenty-four Breton peasant women entered, ushered in by a padre. They ate brill and drank cider, and it appeared that on the next day somebody in some convent was about to take the veil. So I retired to bed with Mr Priestley's incomplete works, and was presently dreaming that that distinguished writer and myself were taking the veil together. Only the officiating clergyman kept taking objection to Mr Priestley's pipe.

Is there a worse golf-course in the world than La Baule? The greens are good, but the fairway looks as though the dustmen had removed it, or dumped it there—I am not quite sure which. Then, again, the hinterland, or back-shore, or whatever it is you call it! Balzac places the scene of "Béatrix" next door at Le Croisic, but even he, in the stupendously dull pages of that majestic novel, has not painted the monotony of those miles upon miles of salt lakes and what appear to be sewage farms. Add the more desolate reaches of Southport to

the unmitigated horrors of Southend and Peacockhaven, and you still cannot touch that wilderness which crawls up to the very back doors of this fashionable *plage*. However, it is fashionable, thank Heaven, or at least it is my intention that it shall appear so to my companion, who is even less travelled than I. This morning I took him on the beach and invited him to lie down on a heap of mud, attired in a dressing-gown and sandals, wrist-watch, and, parasol. I assured my friend that the "Tatler" photographer would be round presently. He wasn't! Later I pointed out a joyous group in which Sir Thomas Beecham was bathing with—Miss Sitwell, Mrs Patrick Campbell, and Mr Tom Webster. Anyhow, my paper is drawing to an end, and my holiday task is nearly done. As this is a film article, let me say that last night I saw a film called *Asphalte*, which, however, appeared to be about something else, like this article.

## 24. "The Film Till Now"

September 10, 1930.

IF YOU DIPPED CARELESSLY into "The Film Till Now: A Survey of the Cinema," by Paul Rotha, you might imagine that it was the ordinary high-brow guff which makes the film criticism of Bloomsbury as hard to read as it is easy to write. For myself, I have carefully avoided telling readers of the "Tatler" that the neo-vorticism of Olga Preobrazhenskaia is not to be confounded with the centrifugal Platonism of Dziga-Vertov. Do readers think that this kind of stuff is not written? Very well, then. Readers opening Mr Rotha's book at random might come across this passage: "With the coming of the sound film, the cine-eye theories expand to embrace the cine-radio. The camera becomes the ear as well as the eye. The *kihoki* becomes the *radioki*. They seek now to express their material in terms of cine-eye sound, in the form of radio vision. Eventually they will come to the simultaneous montage of visual and sound facts, sensitive to the touch and capable of being smelled." As to which I will only say that when this simultaneous montage occurs I shall simultaneously mount the steps leading to the street. Or again, the reader dipping carelessly might come across this: "Realising the primary aim of the surrealist movement to be the

expression of dreams and thought tangents of an imaginative person provoked by material surroundings and placed on paper or canvas, it is natural that the film lends itself to an expression which demands 'imaginative velocity and moral nonchalance, unlimited visibility, and a sensitivity to the fantasy of the commonplace.' " "Bunk, darling," as the bishop said to the actress. But Mr Rotha's lapses into the jargon of the art critics of the sixpenny weeklies are rare, and they do not spoil his book, which is easily the best yet produced on this really quite important subject. The author sees with astonishing clearness that a film which is a work of art can never have anything whatever to do with the talkie which is to entertain the manicurist and her swain. The difference is not new ; it is the old difference between the drama which is an art and the theatre which is a commercial proposition. Our author is all for the first and will have nothing whatever to do with the second, though he is, I think, slightly inclined to overstate his case. He says, for example : " Griffith and his super-spectacles will disappear under the dust of time, if they have not already done so, but 'The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari' will be revived again and again, until the existing copy wears out." One should not lay down the law quite so absolutely as that. There are lots of Griffith spectacles which I should very much like to see again, and I personally can never tire of *Broken Blossoms* or *Way Down East*. The worst of Mr Rotha, as of all high-brow writers about the cinema, is that he will not recognise what I should like to call the half-way film, the film like *Four Sons*, or *White Shadows in the South Seas*, or *Finis Terrae*, or anything by Chaplin or Jannings. I am persuaded that what the average intelligent cinema-goer likes is something half-way between the Caligari stuff, in which people look like parallelograms and furniture in rhomboid, and the nitwit film in which stenographers renounce diamonds and protection for the horny-handed wistfulness of some virginal cow-puncher. Most cinema-goers, I am persuaded, just want a reasonably good story reasonably well told. But Mr Rotha is all, so to speak, for Caligari. He writes : " Preconception of the film-shooting manuscript makes exhaustive claims on the creative mentality of the director or scenarist. In a novel, a writer develops his theme by written descriptions ; in a play, an author makes use of dialogue and stage directions ; but a film scenarist thinks and works in terms of externally expressive visual images. A scenarist must always visualise his thoughts in terms of images on a screen in a cinema ; he must, moreover, be able to control, select, and organise the imaginary images as does a writer his words. . . . It is therefore not his words

which are of importance, but the visual images that they define for the use of the director." So far so good. But then our author goes on : "The assembling of the film manuscript is, perhaps, the most exacting form of expressive writing. It demands without question even greater powers of concentration than the writing of a novel or the painting of a picture. Comparison may well be made to the composing of a symphony." What I should like to ask Mr Rotha is : Who told him that the symphony demands greater concentration than the novel or a picture ? Does he suppose that Beethoven, when he was thinking out a tune to go with Schiller's "Ode to Joy," concentrated more than Cervantes did over "Don Quixote," or Michael Angelo over his ceiling ?

But there is an enormous amount in this book with which I am tremendously in sympathy. I rejoice, for example, that somebody should at last have pricked the bubble of Lupu Pick : "The work of Lupu Pick has tended to become over-praised and over-estimated. He played, it is true, a part of some importance in the gradual dawn of the German naturalistic school, with the production in 1923 of *New Year's Eve*, but this film itself was dreary." In my view the last six words should be engraved in gold on a marble tablet and set on the desk of every art director, for in the long run your art film tends to become dreary. I rejoice to read this sort of thing : "All through her career Norma Talmadge has achieved success by looking slightly perplexed and muzzy about the eyes." And this : "The Rudolph Valentino affair was worked with such success, that after his death a guild was actually formed of people who had never set eyes on him, to perpetuate his name." The book gives a magnificent account of all that has been done and is being done abroad, and of all that has not been done and is not being done, and, unless English mentality alters, will not be done in this country.

Mr Rotha passes our film producers in review, disposing of them as neatly as a crack batsman will dispose of a long-hop. Though Mr Miles Mander has been connected principally with acting, he has made one film that provides "evidence of wit and intelligence." Of Mr Maurice Elvey no more is said than that he has "over fifty productions to his credit." That settles Mr Elvey. Of Mr Anthony Asquith we are told that "it is essential for him to lose his Victorian sense of humour (described, I believe, as 'Asquith puckishness') before he can favourably progress." I have never met Mr Rotha, but when I do I shall, for this last sentence, shake him by the hand. Moderate praise is given to Mr Hitchcock ; and then there is something about the film

called *Piccadilly*. The camera work of this film was done by Werner Brandes, while the settings were by Alfred Jünge, and it is perhaps reasonable of Mr Rotha to observe that *Piccadilly* was "not strictly the product of British studios." Mr Rotha's attitude towards the talkie is uncompromising. He writes: "A film in which the speech and sound effects are perfectly synchronised and coincide with their visual images on the screen is absolutely contrary to the aim of the cinema. It is a degenerate and misguided attempt to destroy the real use of the film and cannot be accepted as coming within the true boundaries of the cinema." Our author concludes with the statement that there is one legitimate use for the dialogue film, and that is the topical news and gazette reel. "Here the appeal to the mind is quite different, for there is no aim at dramatic effect in news speeches. They are simply a record in which the interest lies more in the speech than in the visual image. They are not constructed films seeking to achieve the dramatic effect of a story. They are an elementary form of the cinema 'without joy' and, considered as such, are only of casual and historic interest." I fully agree. The book is magnificently illustrated and most handsomely got up, and I should like to repeat that it is the best book on the cinema I have yet seen. Jonathan Cape publishes.

## 25. *Concerning This and That*

December 24, 1930.

NEWS COMES TO HAND of the erection of yet two more cinemas, in conjunction with the announcement of which I notice the extraordinary absence of the word "mammoth." The first is the Trocadero at the Elephant and Castle, which, one understands, is to be managed on strictly business lines. I say this with the greater confidence since, according to the latest information, "so great has been the demand for tickets for the opening night of the Trocadero, the 6000-capacity theatre at the Elephant and Castle, that the directors have decided to abandon the idea of the usual 'guest-night première' and sell every seat in the house." I note that a £15,000 organ will be mounted on a lift and turn-table. I can bear this. I note also that ear-phones will be fitted to many seats for the use of those who have defective hearing. At the

moment I am indifferent to these, and for two reasons : First, I am not deaf ; and second, if I were, I should not use them. But that which wildly excites me is the notification that there will be a fixture to each seat to take a gentleman's hat ! Visiting recently one of our newest and most expensive cinemas, I was accosted by a velvet-breeched flunkey who demanded my hat almost with menaces. I did what the lawyers always advise one to do : I met his demand with a blank refusal. He smiled sardonically, but it was with a little flush of triumph that I mounted the staircase to the seven-and-sixpenny loge and under my seat deposited my hat which, by the way, was a brand-new bowler. That which I retrieved at the end of the performance was a battered ruin, for the seats of this theatre do not permit of a hat ; or this seat didn't. As I passed the flunkey on my way out he was mellifluously offering to relieve an elderly gentleman of a silk topper. . . .

The second new cinema is the Forum at Fulham, a happy example of alliteration as who should say the Ambidextrum at Ambleside, or the Byzantium at Billingsgate. The charming publicity agent, who with her compliments forwards these items "for the favour of insertion," informs me that in a new film, entitled *Too Many Cooks*, will appear Mr A. Bromley-Davenport, "who will be well remembered for his excellent characterisations in silent pictures." This takes me back to a book I once read by Mrs Margaret Talmadge, the mother of proud Norma, roguish Constance, and mouse-like Natalie. This good lady read her daughters' hearts while they were yet children as easily as a wider public was to read their faces. She realised when Norma was sitting at the dinner-table with far-away eyes and moving lips, not that her daughter was eating with her mouth open, but that she was memorising Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark." Yet Norma, you see, "despite her intensity, was essentially too much of the earth, earthy, ever to find happiness in religious seclusion." This was just as well, since there might have been some difficulty in finding that commodity at Hollywood. After expatiating upon this in connection with her daughters, Mrs Talmadge generously admitted that "in the non-celluloid world" things might be different. Presumably the film publicity agent lives entirely in the celluloid world, or is invited by his or her employer so to do. Be that as it may, Mr Bromley-Davenport will certainly *not* be remembered by me for anything in connection with the films whatever. Mr Bromley-Davenport as a young man appeared in the original cast of "The Second Mrs Tanqueray." He also created one of the leading parts in "His Excellency the Governor," and was one of the most

distinguished comedy and character actors on the English stage ten years before the films were invented, twenty years before they became seeable, and thirty years before anybody could listen to them. I am also informed that Mr George Bealby is "already well known for his screen villainy." Actually, Mr Bealby first made his appearance on the stage thirty-one years ago. He married Mabel, the brilliantly clever and much-lamented sister of Aubrey Beardsley. These things are the common knowledge of the non-celluloid world, though of course wholly unknown to film fans.

I further read that the management of the Regal Theatre has decided to put on for Christmas "a family show with a special appeal to the children." May I here make an appeal on behalf of the kiddies of this country, an appeal based upon what I myself felt about Christmas entertainment as soon as I had arrived at the mature age of seven? Up to that age I do not think it matters much what children see, or whether they like it or not! But at seven one has faculties about one, or some of them, with an inkling of others that are to follow. Let me say firmly that at seven the only Christmas entertainments I could at all put up with were those of the excessively adult kind. I even remember when I was eight objecting to my parents taking dress-circle seats for the pantomime because I had realised the year before how much more enviable the stalls were in their nearer approach to those fairies, genii, village maidens, and other houris of the lamp-black eyelashes and blue eyelids. For several years well-meaning neighbours took me not to the grown-up pantomime but to those dull, sexless, and practically fashioned entertainments which even then elderly aesthetes with lilac minds were devising for the edification of their own horrid brood. I have the distinctest recollection of the loathing with which I regarded these kindergarten excesses, and at twelve years of age I struck! An elderly lady insisting that I should see a child's play entitled "Froggy Would a-Wooing Go," containing no principal boy, carol singers instead of a chorus, and a comedian who even then was known to be unfunny, I said firmly that about four o'clock I proposed to be sick. Let me therefore implore the management of the Regal to present the children with a film in which a blonde American nitwit declines a yacht moored to a pier in Florida with ropes of pearls, because her heart is chained to a French dago with a gift for Negro spirituals masquerading as a waiter in one of Harlem's selecter brothels. The children may not know quite what this means, though at twelve one child of my acquaintance would have had an idea.

## 26. *Two Films*

*December 31, 1930.*

MY VERY GOOD FRIEND and better critic, Mr Sydney Carroll, writing of *War Nurse* at the Empire, said that this film, with all its crudities and misplaced emotionalism, brought back things which it were better to forget. I agree, and I disagree. I agree that this film is an orgy, welter, and slough of thinly veiled eroticism. I agree that it is revolting that the entire war should appear to have been fought in order that we may see a flighty young nurse delivered of child in a potting-shed reduced to splinters by shell-fire. I sat amid a bevy of damsels apparently of the type-writing persuasion. Yet even these giggled when the last lot of high explosive introduced us to the world's youngest film star. Incidentally I think the thing which most revolted me was the glimpse we had of these young women before they became war nurses. Everything in America is bigger than it is anywhere else, and that would appear to apply equally to female inanity. Where I do not agree with Mr Carroll is in the suggestion that anything having to do with the war were better forgotten, for to forget any of the many kinds of horror connected with the war, and to remember only what we still allege to have been its glamour, is to bring the next war nearer. The young people of to-day, it should be remembered, are not interested in what happened when they were sucking their thumbs, and they occasionally move their thumbs to tell us so.

I know of some alleged intelligent witlings who say quite cheerfully that they are prepared for any old war that cares to come along because it cannot be duller than London after eleven o'clock. In a way there is something in this. In pre-war days I should have very violently objected to handing London over to the Germans. To-day I should not mind because there is nothing left worth handing over. In fact, if the Germans ruled this country, there can be no doubt that the National Theatre would be in full swing, there would be performances of "Rosenkavalier," the general public could buy cigarettes and beer, and consume both in a reasonable place with or without sandwiches, up till two in the morning, and on Sunday nights cinema-goers turning out at eleven

o'clock would not be compelled to go home without bite or sup. There would be no further nonsense about the dole, everybody would be compelled to work, and Sir Thomas Beecham would be conducting till his arms would no longer wag. In fact, with the exception of a trifle of national pride, I cannot see that if William had come we should not have been a hundred times better off. Even the fact that he would probably have brought Little Willie with him does not shake me. Be it understood, of course, that though I am perfectly prepared to give this shockingly run country to the Germans, to have them trying to take it by force is another matter.

To be quite serious, no grown man who is not a raging lunatic ever again wants the job of preventing them, because every grown man remembers what that entailed. But our young men who have not grown to sense, nor look likely to, know nothing about the past or any war, and so far as I can see have not the brains to guess what the next one must be like. Therefore, in my view, and I think in Mr Carroll's when he thinks it over, no horrid facet that the war possessed should ever be lost sight of, for the simple reason that whenever the next war happens that facet will repeat itself. Some day we shall get a film, a comprehensive film lasting a whole evening, which will show all sides of war—the chivalry and the brutality, the courage and the funk, the mess, muddle, and miracles of organisation, the heroism of the common soldier and the poltroonery of those who hid and covered themselves with medals at the base, the resolution and responsibility of officers, and the shiftlessness of which they had to make the best, the blazing excitement and the unspeakable boredom, the glory of leave and the utter misery of mud, the bright hope and the ever present fear, the high purpose, *camaraderie*? fun, and the despair which attends disease and death. In this film there must be a place for our war nurses, some of whom, doubtless, in the course of their nursing came by babies. But that these should amount to 1 per cent of the whole number of nurses employed, I beg very strictly to doubt. A film such as I am talking about will preserve everything in its proper proportion and not, as all American war films do, suffer from exaggerative paranoïa. I should like to be able to say that I believe this film will be English. But I don't believe anything of the sort. I know it will be German.

It is astonishing how quickly the public responds to the really first-class thing. Without any extraordinary alarms and excursions, without any particular blowing of trumpets, the Alhambra this week

decided to put on a French talkie than which, on the face of it, there could hardly be anything less hopeful. The film in question was called *Sous les Toits de Paris*. At once the word went round that here was an altogether exceptional film, with the result that when I attended on Thursday evening expecting to find an empty house, there wasn't a seat to be had. And it was only by the extreme courtesy of the management that I could obtain a perch. I am a great believer in understatement and, this being so, I shall be content to say that, leaving out of the question the large pictures dealing with epic themes and big subjects, this French film is the best in the way of intimacy that I have ever seen. The story deals with two French youths alleged to be earning their living, the one as a street singer and the other as a street hawker. Actually the profession of both would be that of "Apache-cum-gigolo-cum-souteneur." Both fall in love with the same young woman about whose profession in real life there would be no doubt, though in this film she exhibits a modesty beyond rubies. And that's all ! Yet on this slender basis is built up a picture of low life in Paris as accurate and as documented as decency permits, and put together with unparalleled ingenuity and artistry. Every single shot in this picture has been composed by an artist, and though it is a delight to note the complete veracity of the French, no words are needed to bring this picture within the grasp of the most English intelligence. The music throughout was charming, and I will leave the reader to gauge the intensity of everybody's interest by saying that hardly anybody in the audience remembered to smoke. Some day there will be a Film Repertory Theatre in which all the best films will be religiously preserved and religiously performed. This one will certainly have to be included. There was a programme which, with the curious perversity of programmes, failed to inform us who the director of this film was, and who were the artists engaged. It was, however, generous of information as to who published the theme song and where it could be obtained.

## 27. "*Abraham Lincoln*"

February 25, 1931.

THE SUBJECT OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN is so big that I hardly know where to begin. Let me make a start, then, by saying that since I shed my schoolboy notions of heroism, Abraham Lincoln has been my favourite hero. Napoleon, desiring to be buried "among the people whom I have so greatly loved," when in fact he never loved anybody except himself, always makes me feel a little sick. Nelson, with his fine death-or-glory sentiments, was a braggart—a heavenly one if you like, but still a braggart. Marlborough was only a soldier, and Mussolini talks too much. As for Alexander, I read the other day that he alternated world conquest with biliousness. Hannibal was extremely clever in managing elephants and crossing Alps to no particular purpose, and as for Julius Caesar, Mr Shaw has drawn so logical a portrait that I feel sure the logic belongs to Mr Shaw. In any case, all these people lived too long ago for us to know very much about them, and I do not believe that anybody can really know what was in the mind of Charlemagne or Gustavus Vasa, Justinian or *le Roi Soleil*. But we do know a good deal about Lincoln, and there are certainly people still alive whose heads he patted. I use the phrase metaphorically, because I do not believe that Lincoln was, as was said of some smug celebrity, an inveterate head-patter. The best account of Lincoln, though it is only a flash, occurs in Walt Whitman's "Collect." Whitman is describing Lincoln's visit to New York as President-Elect. The streets were crowded as for the receptions of Andrew Jackson, Clay, Webster, Hungarian Kossuth, and the Prince of Wales, yet there was nothing of "all that indescribable human roar and magnetism, unlike any other sound in the universe, the glad, exulting thunder shouts of countless unloos'd throats 'of men !'" Whitman, who viewed the scene from the top of a bus, says that the whole thing took place in complete silence. Lincoln was unknown and unliked, and the sullen New York populace seemed tacitly to agree that if Lincoln's few supporters would make no commotion, they would abstain also. Lincoln arrived at Astor House in the first of three shabby hired barouches, descended, stretched himself,

surveyed the glum crowd forty thousand strong and containing a liberal sprinkling of assassins, stretched himself again, and then, with perfect composure and no haste, ascended the portico steps, and, "accompanied by a few unknown-looking persons," disappeared. Whitman was immensely struck by Lincoln's "look and gait—his perfect composure and coolness—his unusual and uncouth height, his dress of complete black, stove-pipe hat pushed back on the head, dark-brown complexion, seam'd and wrinkled yet canny-looking face, black, bushy head of hair, disproportionately long neck, and his hands held behind as he stood observing the people." But Whitman was more than a reporter, and he goes on :

As I sat on the top of my omnibus, and had a good view of him, the thought, dim and inchoate then, has since come out clear enough, that four sorts of genius, four mighty and primal hands, will be needed to the complete limning of this man's future portrait—the eyes and brains and finger-touch of Plutarch and *Æschylus* and Michael Angelo, assisted by Rabelais.

I am glad that Whitman added Rabelais, for the name at once takes this greatest of great men out of Mr Drinkwater's pale and sanctimonious gallery. It is not always easy to see a great man steadily and to see him whole, but I think Whitman's rare quality of vision achieved this.

I confess, then, that it was with the liveliest anticipation that I went to the London Pavilion to see the Griffith film. I came away disappointed only with the size of the audience at the first *matinée*—the house was so thin and so cold that I had to send to the vestibule for my top-coat. Griffith has made no mistakes of commission and only two of omission, one of which is only an error, dramatically speaking. Everybody knows how young Lincoln, stirred to a white passion at some black-slave auction, said : "If ever I get the chance to strike this thing, I'll strike it hard." This incident is omitted in the film, nor is there anything to show the spectator what aspects of slavery it was which roused the North against that custom. On the other hand, the omission of all sentimental incidents and considerations allows us to see the war of 1861-65 in its true perspective. This war was not, as many people suppose, a war about slavery, but a war about the right of the Southern States to secede from the Union. Lincoln was not a sentimentalist in the matter of slavery, saying categorically : "Certainly the negro is not our equal in colour ; perhaps not in many other respects ; still, in the right to put into his mouth the bread that his own hands have earned, he is the equal of every other man, white or black." And then

#### AROUND CINEMAS

there is his reply to Horace Greeley, who had addressed a public letter to him about the policy which Lincoln seemed to be pursuing with regard to the slaves of the rebels. Horace Greeley's wording here is proof that Lincoln was not the red-hot leader of an anti-slave campaign. Mr Gladstone did not *seem to* pursue a policy with regard to Bulgarian atrocities ; it was obvious to everybody that the old man was pursuing it, and that it would trip him up. In his reply to Greeley's letter, Lincoln wrote :

My paramount object is to save the Union and not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it ; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it ; and if I could do it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.

Lincoln was never tired of making this point, and in his famous "with malice towards none" speech, made it for the last time. "We have preserved the American Union," he said, "and we have abolished a great wrong." The film keeps these two things in admirable perspective. This brings me to Griffith's second omission, which is that he gives us only the fag-end of this great speech, whereas I feel that anybody who has been held by this conscientious, unsensational film would have been willing to listen to the whole of it. There is one awful addition. Lincoln says :

With malice towards none, with charity for all, it is for us to resolve that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom ; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

After which Griffith makes Lincoln say "Thank you !", which is like listening to Bach's "Chromatic Fantasia" and then hearing the organist blow his nose. But the slip is unimportant, and what follows is conceived on the grand scale. We do not see Lincoln again after his mad and handsome assassin has jumped on to the stage and launched his steady "Sic semper tyrannis !" There is no death-bed scene, and instead, Griffith takes us through a long panorama of bare winter woods to the early log-cabin, which merges finally and with crashing choral accompaniment to the last monument. Neither is there unnecessary vilification of John Wilkes Booth who, though insane, was actuated by that "general honest thought" with which Antony credited Brutus. Clara Mortis, the American actress, has left an account of this young *détrague* to whom she attributed the highest moral and intellectual qualities. To conclude, the film is well worth a visit, and Lincoln is grandly played by Mr Walter Huston.

28. "*Cimarron*"

March 18, 1931.

"CIMARRON" HAS COME, been seen, and has, I gather, conquered. At the end of this film, which is adapted from Miss Edna Ferber's famous novel, a ludicrous thing happened. It was announced that a short film would immediately be put on the screen showing the scene which had taken place in the foyer of the Leicester Square Theatre three hours previously, including the arrival of the celebrities who had been prevailed upon to see this much-boomed film. "But when she got there, the cupboard was bare." In other words, there weren't any celebrities, and nobody was to be espied except the feminine and wholly fluttering part-author of a recent theatrical failure. It is true that Mr Basil Dean kept bobbing up and down in front of the camera. But one gathered that he represented the hosts rather than the guests. One saw a microphone, into which several people with long noses, and looking like High Commissioners for Bulawayo and Beyond, peered and snuffed something about this film cementing the friendship between the American and British cinema industries. Sentiments of this sort are too obviously guff even to be uttered. The American film industry has nothing whatever to gain by British success, and sooner than this should happen Hollywood will see Elstree Ferber! And while the reader pauses to admire that *jeu d'esprit*, let me ask him, or more probably her, to consider that cement may sometimes resemble mortar, whose function it is to keep bricks apart. Nothing can knit this country to the American film industry so closely as the inability to produce films in any way comparable to the American. We may come ultimately to produce better little pictures than America, though I see nothing in the world of the theatre to justify such optimism. But it is certain that we can never produce such good big films, if only for the reason that the main attribute of bigness is size. *Cimarron* contains forty thousand people, among whom Mr Richard Dix is quite plainly discernible.

I am not going to argue a point which every artist in stage-craft knows—that just as a Reinhardt could stage the Thirty Years War with an army of fifteen people, so any producer who is not a mere crowd-

monger would give "the impression of" forty thousand people with the use of four thousand. If he were a great artist he would probably prefer four hundred. Your great painter tackling his "Last Judgment" will with four hundred figures and his own mighty imagination convey an adequate notion of an event which is, I suggest, at least as world-shaking a happening as the rise of a few shacks into a Paradise for gangsters. But Mr Wesley Ruggles is not a Michael Angelo, and his way of filming the Last Day would be to wait for it to happen, and have a battery of cameras in readiness with a special sound apparatus for recording the Last Trump. I will, however, not make the point that forty thousand is an unnecessary number. Instead, I choose the point that in this country it would be impossible to employ all this amount of labour for the reason that it would be impossible to sell the result of their labour. If forty thousand men are to be employed in this country it would have to be on something for which the community has use, and that something is certainly not a picture. Some would employ these forty thousand men to build a battleship, others would have them push back Selfridge's a few yards and so widen Oxford Street. Living at Beaconsfield, I should use this labour not to create an Oklahoma of plaster and putty, but to demolish Uxbridge and its loathsome road. But whatever the use we Britshers found for such an army, it could never be so wholly unproductive in the old politico-economic sense as this business of dressing up and posing in front of a camera in order to give the quarter-educated something to gape at and cuddle through, which is nine-tenths of the cinema business.

*Cimarron* belongs to the other tenth, though the claim that it is the greatest picture that ever has been or could be made is disposed of by the fact that there is a minimum of camera art in it, and the story is poor. The camera in this film is made to act as a journalist writes ; it reports everything that it sees, unselectively, and so without any particular significance. The story has all the disadvantages of not being written for the screen, a disadvantage which must attend all adaptations from novels. Doubtless Miss Edna Ferber writing at length made convincing that spirit of unrest which prompted Yancey Cravat to go off on adventurous quest for years together after the manner of the man in Kipling's "Sestina of the Tramp Royal." But in the film the man is merely an ass. Doubtless the Spanish-American War was the right sort of thing to go off to. But that did not abolish the post, and the spectacle of Yancey galloping home on a charger belonging to Roosevelt's Rough-Riders is to me really irritating. Why didn't the

fellow write to the wife he had left behind ? He rides away again, and nothing is heard of him from 1912 till 1927 or thereabouts. In the meantime the collection of village shacks has become Oklahoma under the direction of Mrs Yancey, who is now a Congresswoman. This notable lady, who is the film's real hero, is opening a new oil well when she hears that an old tramp has thrown himself upon some dynamite to save a gang of workmen. It is, of course, Yancey, and I personally refuse to slobber over the facts as presented in this film. Either Yancey during those years when he abandoned his wife and children was doing something worth while, or he is a mere figment of womanish romance. Miss Ferber relies upon the first alternative and it should have been the business of the film to show us some of the worth-while things that Yancey was doing. There would have been plenty of room, for one could willingly have sacrificed the very long and wholly sentimental episode in which Yancey defends a naughty lady from the action of the local Vigilance Society. The absurd importance given to this episode throws the whole film out of balance ; admirable in itself and as a separate film, it has nothing to do with the development of Oklahoma, which is the main theme. Doubtless the incident is seen in proper perspective in Miss Ferber's novel. But it takes room which should have been given to Yancey's exploits whether they are in the novel or not. The whole mistake has been to try to run the admirable theme of a town's development in harness with an individual story which is not good enough and actually harms that theme. It may be argued that what Yancey was doing abroad does not concern Oklahoma at home. Then why interest us in Yancey ? Probably the larger scope of the novel enabled Miss Ferber to succeed where the film signally fails. But there are aspects of *Cimarron* which make it very much a film to see. All the Wild West stuff is admirable, the incident of the dead nigger boy is extremely moving, and in the character of the little Jew who looks like a Guido Reni Christ beauty is achieved. There are lots and lots of things to see in this film, whose crowning merit is that it makes two and a half hours pass like twenty minutes. It is, in brief, a fine piece of entertainment though hardly a work of art, and I should have had much louder praises to sing if the publicity merchants had not quacked so loudly. When will publicity directors realise that the secret of advertising, as all good advertisers know, is under- rather than over-statement ? *Cimarron* is not the best film that ever could be made, and it is because this claim has been put forward so loudly that the critic's first job in connection with this film is to point out why it

is not of the kind out of which best films are made. *Cimarron* is a good spectacular film and those responsible for it should have claimed no more.

## 29. *The Dreyfus Film*

*April 29, 1931.*

THE UNHEALED WOUND of the lost provinces and the spectre of another war were in 1894 ever present in the mind of every French patriot. What Frenchman—soldier, politician, or *bon bourgeois*—could be unaware of the menace of that young Emperor proclaiming militarism his god and prancing on a white horse and in shining armour up and down the farther side of that Eastern frontier? He jests at scars that never felt a wound. Invasion can have few terrors for islanders upon whose shores no enemy has set foot for nine hundred years and who abroad have tasted no defeats that have seemed to matter. But the French are necessarily wiser. No film could expect to give the whole or even a tithe of the huge causes which lay behind the petty details of the Dreyfus affair. In countries where and at a time when anybody who is hard-up and in need of a little ready money does a little job of spying, what is it that one spy should be wrongfully accused? There comes a moment in the Dreyfus case when Count Panizzardi—who was, of course, an Italian—is offered a complete plan of the defences of Nice. Panizzardi's view is that neither Italy nor Germany nor anybody else is ever going to attack Nice, that anyhow it can't be defended, and further, that this is the eleventh time he has been offered these plans which he already knows by heart. However, he must suppose the poor fellow's trouble to have been worth fifty francs, which sum he proposes. A great deal of the wholesale spying which made the Dreyfus affair possible must have been made up of absurd incidents like this. It is curious that if Dreyfus had not been a Jew there never could have been any Dreyfus case. The same miscarriage of justice might have taken place, though this is extremely unlikely. But if it had taken place, nobody could have bothered very much about it. The fact that Dreyfus was a Jew was sufficient to unchain a mass of passion, which it would be absurd to call religious, the like of which had not been seen since the

days of the Inquisition. That human beings should tear each other to pieces, flay each other's bodies, and consign them to the flames in this world on the hypocritical pretence of saving them from the fire in the next, all because of differences of opinion as to the nature of a Supreme Being and the method of worshipping Him—all this is something to stagger the Creator and the world He has created, and incidentally rouse the pen of a Chesterton to its wildest derision and possibly deepest understanding. Never since the days when Nero let loose his lions into whose open mouths virgins ecstatically walked had Europe seen such a spectacle as this of men of honour, liberality, and kindness of mind rushing to commit acts from which a madman or a professional criminal would have recoiled. And all to keep a Jew on Devil's Island ! Dreyfus's innocence jumped to the eyes of the French War Office almost before he got to Devil's Island. Anybody not blinded by passion who listened to that trial must have known Dreyfus was innocent. Now if Dreyfus had not been a Jew the French War Office would have said to itself: "Well, we've made a nice mess of it. It's an awful nuisance, of course, and we shall look very silly. But we can't let that poor devil stop on Devil's Island." But Dreyfus *was* a Jew, and therefore not only the Ministry for War but everybody else in France, except, of course, the Jews, said something quite different. What they said was: "To release Dreyfus means a defeat for anti-Semitism." The whole point to any Frenchman, then, was not whether Dreyfus was innocent or guilty, but the effect which the quashing of his sentence would have upon their particular shade of religious susceptibility.

The Dreyfus case, then, sprang out of two emotions which have always lain dear to the French heart—love of country and detestation of the one race on earth which hasn't got a country. Complicate this by a certain number of pro-Jews, for I take it that you cannot have a violent feeling in one direction without equal reaction in the opposite direction. One is always hearing of the French anti-clericals, whence I am prepared to believe that there must be clericals. It is not to be expected that either of these parties could refrain from having a fire of religious dissension so wholly delectable as that provided by the unfortunate Dreyfus. Balzac wrote a novel, entitled "Une Ténébreuse Affaire." But even that great master of fiction could not have imagined half the tenebriety of the *Affaire Dreyfus*. Hence we come across that extraordinary figure, Père du Lac, who has been described as the most dangerous and unscrupulous Jesuit of his day. Père du Lac was the confessor of General Boisdeffre, one of the great powers behind the

whole affair. To the Englishman it may seem astonishing that whether Dreyfus was or was not guilty of selling military secrets, should depend upon the kind of priest chosen by a French general to hear his confession. But let us English not put on too many airs. Let us suppose that we had lost the Crimean War, and that Charles Bradlaugh, held to be an atheist, had later been accused of selling military secrets to Russia. Suppose that in the middle of the Boer War Mr Kensit had been accused of being a spy in the pay of Kruger. Can we be absolutely certain that we, with all our national phlegm, would have been able to dissociate the spy charge from whatever views we happened to hold in the matter of atheism and vestments? The French are an excitable race and, Heaven knows, there was enough in the Dreyfus case to excite them.

*Dreyfus*, the film at the London Pavilion, is an enormous credit to British International Pictures. Obviously no film can do more than present a mere skeleton of the world-famous events, and to expect that the actors should express all that lay behind the actions of Cavaignac and Generals Boisdeffre and Pélieux would have been to credit Messrs George Zucco, Kay Souper, and Fisher White with the power to amplify Lord Burleigh's nod. Mr Sam Livesey worthily enacts Maître Labori, and Mr Charles Carson is admirable as Colonel Picquart, except that he credits that honest man with a sense of humour. Mr Cedric Hardwicke's Dreyfus is a masterpiece of make-up, though in the rôle of a corpse at a funeral he has not much to do. The astounding wonder of the film is Mr George Merritt's Zola; this is wonderful, and astounds. I do not think that any film on about one-hundredth part of the Dreyfus case could be better. At a time when I was contemplating a trifling foolish adaptation of the great German play on this subject, I wrote to a well-known bookseller asking for all the literature on the subject. The bookseller, in his reply, asked for £200 on account, a banker's reference, and the name of the furniture repository to which the van loads should be sent. Elstree must not be discouraged because it has not achieved the impossible. Its achievement of the possible is magnificent. I do not think, however, that the programme should inform us that *Major Dreyfus* is still alive. Dreyfus was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel on September 26, 1918.

## 30. *A Lovely Film*

*May 6, 1931.*

THE FILM WORLD is at the moment staggered by the kind of surprise which occurs so regularly in all the other arts that one would almost expect it to be looked for. That surprise is nothing less than this : that the public, or some of it, really does like the highest when it gets the chance to see it. The chance in these matters is everything. I have no political opinions, though perhaps it would be better to say that my political opinions are of the strongest, approaching even to virulence, but that, having enough sense to know their worthlessness, I am content to keep quiet about them. Mr Baldwin's place in history, therefore, shall not be determined by me ; he achieved, however, something better than a mere Act of Parliament when he popularised Mary Webb's " Precious Bane." It has often been said, and I believe Arnold Bennett was the first to say it, that if only one copy of a really good book were printed, and that copy were dropped in the middle of the Sahara, that book would still not die. But discovery may take longer than the lifetime of those in whose day the book is published, and among much that we owe to Arnold Bennett must be counted the fact that it was he who rescued " The Bridge of San Luis Rey " from the desert of public indifference. Who in the theatre would ever have thought that quiet little plays like " To See Ourselves " and " After All " would have made something of a furore ? Who in the world of music would have believed that night after night in a jazz-ridden age audiences could be found to pack themselves sardine-wise into the Queen's Hall to listen to Beethoven ? Some little time ago a film was produced having to do with life as it is really lived on the hill of Montmartre. The film bore no sort of relation to those popular orgies in which the descendants of Liane de Pougy and Cléo de Mérode couch themselves nightly on leopard skins, quaffing sparkling Burgundy out of golden beakers tended to their lips by naked Nubians. The film was not called " Paris Nights," or anything of the sort. It was entitled simply *Sous les Toits de Paris*. It was at its first showing, and with a handful of high-brow enthusiasts, an enormous success. Then somebody, whose sanity must

have been thereby suspect, suggested that the film should be publicly exhibited, or, as theatre folks say, put on for a run. Then somebody, whose state of mind thereby became certifiable, agreed, with the result that for three months the film has been a roaring success. It is a talkie, and, what is more, a French talkie. Yet this has proved no obstacle. Now one must be very careful not to deduce general rules from particular instances, and I am not prepared to swear that outside London and in places like Runcorn, Penzance, and Kidderminster *Sous les Toits* would be what is technically known as a "wow." This brings me once more to the old question, which is the disparity of aim between film critics and film producers. The film critic wants a picture to be so good that it will stand up to educated taste, whereas the aim of the film producer is to produce something which cannot be defeated by lack of taste.

On two successive evenings last week I visited a small picture house in Hammersmith and the Phoenix Theatre, and it seemed to me that the fare submitted, whilst giving the greatest possible pleasure to the type of audience for which it was designed, must have sovereignly displeased the other. I do not believe that the audience which at the Phoenix listened entranced to M. René Clair's new film could have sat out more than ten minutes of *Sailors Don't Care*, or whatever the travesty was called ; and equally I don't believe that the audience at the little Hammersmith picture palace, which by the way was not very palatial, could possibly have stomached *Le Million*. This question of disparity, is something which sooner or later the film industry will have to face and solve, that is if it is solvable. There is a small but extremely keen audience for good pictures just as there is at Clacton, Cleethorpes, and Cliftonville an immense audience for anything which on long summer evenings takes place indoors and in the dark. *Le Million*, then, is not for the million. But it is undoubtedly for the fifty or possibly the hundred thousand. Indeed, I have great pleasure in saying that it is from every point of view one of the two best films I have ever seen. What the other one is I have no notion ; I merely put that in for safety. The moment the first shot is thrown on the screen you realise that you are in another world, a world in the assembling of which every other art has its due share. The programme informs us that René Clair "again suggests greater scope for sound films by presenting an entirely new technique which by its staggering ingenuity places the film in a class without parallel." I agree, and as one simple instance would adduce the entire abolition of shadow in this film. The characters are not quite real, and that being so, none is allowed to possess a shadow, a

feat which to anybody who knows anything about film photography is in itself sufficiently staggering. The story might have come straight out of "The Arabian Nights," and concerns two young artists wedded to their mistresses, each other, and to penury. They are besieged by duns. One of them wins a million francs in a lottery, but alas ! left the ticket in the pocket of an old jacket which his young woman has bestowed upon a sanctuary-seeking rascal who might have come straight out of the pages of Beaumarchais. He sells the coat to an old-clothes dealer, who actually is the head of a gang of thieves, and who in turn sells the coat to an opera singer looking for a realistic garment for some Bohemian rôle. The chase now takes place behind the scenes of an opera house during the performance of an opera, and as the tenor insists upon wearing the coat, everybody in pursuit of it, including the thieves' mob, snatches up any available disguise and masquerades as chorus. But to give any coherent account of what happens would be to defeat one's object. The story is pure nightmare, and its whole point lies in the character-drawing, the wealth of burlesque, and the amazing pictorial quality throughout. There is not a single shot in the whole film which might not have proceeded from the brush of a modern French master. The music is delicious, and the acting throughout as good as you will see in any theatre in Paris. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that the film can be enjoyed even without any knowledge of French.

### 31. "Earth"

June 17, 1931.

THERE IS A GOOD old Yorkshire saying to the effect that there are trimmings for all sorts of cloth and buttons for fustian. The other afternoon I saw one of the grandest films, possibly the grandest film, I have ever witnessed. This film was so good that it did not put M. René Clair in his place because one work of art cannot have any effect upon another. Thus nothing that Strauss can write can affect the position of Wagner, while Beethoven remains indifferent to both. The film in question, the name of which the reader will discover if he continue to pursue this article, cannot in any way affect M. René Clair, who remains exactly where he was and very deliciously in his place. But it does

show that there are things of a scope and a size, nay, of an immensity, which M. Clair, being a Frenchman, cannot, and wisely does not, attempt. French genius has always run to perfecting the little rather than to measuring itself against the overwhelming ; the French have been Napoleonic in one thing only, and Napoleon was not a Frenchman. Or only French in the sense in which somebody living in Lundy or Lindisfarne or Puffin Island might be considered English. If any reader does not know where this last place is he was not taken to Llanfairfechan for his holidays, and therefore cannot have been properly brought up. The French have produced the best of the world's little painters, but despite their Delaroche and Delacroix, and giving them Poussin and Claude, they have had no big painters in the sense in which Italy understands that word. In music the same genius for perfection and nothing more has always held. Chopin was a Pole and César Franck a Belgian, which leaves us pretty well at the mercy of Debussy. There is no French symphony within measurable distance of Beethoven, and anybody who has lived in a French provincial town, as I once did for four years, must have nauseating recollections of what French opera is like. "Manon" and that drivelling, snivelling "Werther"—*c'est tout dire*, but not *tout pardonner* ! There is, of course, that enormous mass of French paste which is Gounod's "Faust," but the one and only authentic jewel in the French operatic crown is "Carmen." Does anybody whisper Charpentier and shout Berlioz ? Well, Berlioz shouted so loud that his present generation couldn't hear him, and perhaps this earth will never be the place for listening to one whose orchestra, to be complete, calls for the last trump. In literature we have the same story all over again. After "Lear" and "Macbeth," not to mention "Hamlet," it is impossible to take seriously the Andromagues and the Chimènes of Messrs Racine and Corneille. Nor is anybody who has once heard the organ-roll of Milton going to pay much attention to the harmonium of M. Lamartine. At this point there arises the giant name of Balzac, who in my view could put any three English novelists, except Dickens, in his pocket. But then Balzac had about as much humour as Victor Hugo, and this keeps both of them out of the really first-class. And now I find myself getting into a difficulty, because the fact that Dickens had little except humour also removes him from the first-class, which is rubbish. Wherefore I shall drop the subject, first assuring pedants that my survey of European art from Wapping to Vienna is not intended to be exhaustive. It will, however, have served its purpose if it persuades the reader that *Earth*, the great Russian film exhibited last week,

at the little Academy Cinema in Oxford Street, is of a kind which no Frenchman could ever attempt.

The story of *Earth* has something, though I am not quite clear what, to do with the Bolshevik introduction of tractors to Russian soil. There are no gun-men, no semi-naked and half-caste houris dancing for the delectation of golden-haired, plentifully intoxicated Swedish sailors in Malay brothels, no Greta Garbos or Marlene Dietrichs or even Tallulah Bankheads remaining ladies at heart despite considerable tarnishing of that indifferent thing, the body, no raptures and no rapes, no hand-to-hand fights, no sign of Mr George Bancroft or his Russian equivalent burying his teeth in the hairy bosom of Mr Wallace Beery disguised as a moujik, no palaces, minarets, or cupolas, no bubblings of camels or samovars, no hint of sadistic Grand Dukes pursuing up and down steppes and with gold-handled knouts feminine tennantry arriving at the age of knowing what ought not to be what. In fact, there is nothing in *Earth* to appeal to the young man who behind some glove counter has spent the day living up to the precepts and maxims of those admirable writers, Callisthenes. Nor is there anything to appeal to that typist who, having made antic hay of her employer's punctuation and played even dirtier tricks with his sense, now sallies forth with a complexion the colour of a bilious peach, and her eyebrows north-west and north-east.

*Earth* is a picture for film-goers who are prepared to take their cinema as seriously as Tolstoy took the novel. It has been written and directed by Alexander Dovzhenko. Pictorially, and from the point of view of production, it is far and away the best film I have ever seen, since there are scores of shots in it of which the greatest living masters of the art of painting might be proud. There is one shot where nothing is to be seen except the low earth, a great world of sky, and one little figure of a man running. The figure would appear to be not more than an inch high, or say one five-hundredth part of the entire screen. Yet you feel that here is Cain running away from the murder of Abel. There are compositions, too, which might be Picasso, or Cézanne, or John. In fact the effect of the picture on me has been so great that if for the next ten days anybody mentions to me David Wark Griffith, King Vidor, and Cecil B. de Mille, I shall merely laugh! This picture was at this little theatre for one week only, since it is part of the policy of the management to present only extraordinary if not unique films. This theatre is showing for the week in which these notes appear *Crainquebille*, adapted from Anatole France's work, and

next week there is another Russian film called *Turksib*, having to do with the making of a Siberian railway, which is said to be better than *Earth*. Frankly, I do not believe this, since in my view nothing could be finer. I say without any hesitation whatever that the effect on the mind of this film is similar in kind to that produced by a great play, a great novel, a great poem, or a great painting. *Earth* is silent and has the glorious accompaniment of Russian music.

## 32. *Idle Thoughts of a Busy Fellow*

September 9, 1931.

I REMEMBER AN EVENING when, entering the studio of the B.B.C., I found the announcer with his head buried in the sofa cushions. Lifting a tear-stained face, he told me of an appalling thing, to wit, that he had just announced that the body of some foreign potentate, after being embalmed, would be deposited in the appropriate mausoleum. Only instead of pronouncing the word as you, readers, have just mentally pronounced it, he put the accent on the "o"! He explained that he had that afternoon been out with his wife buying linoleum, and that he had made the mispronunciation by association of sounds and through reading his paper with the eye instead of with the mind. Once let your attention stray, he said, and the wildest mispronunciations are possible. "Nonsense," I said firmly, and strode to the "mike," in front of which I proceeded with my accustomed modesty to lay down some theatrical law. But I, too, let my attention wander, and presently heard myself saying that the law in question was quite inexorable. A sentence or two later I heard the adjective come back to me from the ceiling, as it were, and I realised that I, too, had put the accent on the "o." Next day I had forty post cards from people, saying that they had always maintained that that was the correct pronunciation!

"Very funny, but what has all this to do with the films?"—I can hear the reader asking. My answer is—quite a lot! The operative word, as Mr Belloc would like me to say, is "linoleum"; for during a recent holiday in Scotland I had occasion to pass through a town where that charming textile is made. A Scotch friend who was with me in the car informed me about three miles from this town, which shall be

nameless, that it was famous for its manufacture of scents and perfumes in which it had Coty, Morny, and eke Atkinson beaten to whatever is the Scotch for "frazzle." He bade me inhale as never before. Well, I inhaled, and at the corner of the first street that which smote upon my senses was not Attar of Roses or anything approaching it. "Goodness only knowses," said Mr Chesterton, "the Noselessness of Man." I could indeed have wished at that moment for a greater quality of noselessness. It was many miles before I could wipe from my olfactory nerves the trivial fond record of that persistent, intricate, pungent, oily, glutinous stench—like treacle gone bad. There were other respects, too, in which this struck me as being the grimmest town I have ever visited. The adjacent scenery was revolting in its featurelessness, unrelieved by so much as a slag heap. The buildings were uniformly hideous, and over the whole place hung the air of there being nothing to do "ben the hoose," or whatever is the Scotch for out-of-doors. Joy, I felt, must be a quality unknown to that town since nothing could exist at which one could conceivably wave a sporran! And then I caught sight of a familiar poster proclaiming that Constance Bennett would that evening and throughout the week be seen in something which was postulated as the last word in intoxication. I am afraid I do not remember the exact title, but that which was caught by the tail of my eye read like *Flamingoes of Desire*. I passed through many such towns, possibly less repulsive in that they were odourless, and across the darkling sky of each Constance Bennett trailed her cometary glory. I happened to pass through Stirling, a lovely city by day-time. I arrived at nine-thirty-one in the evening after a long trek from St Andrews and found that the pubs had closed at nine-thirty, an hour at which it is not possible for even a Scotsman to go to bed. The streets were full of larrikins at the most impressionable age whose most innocent employment for the remainder of the evening was to go to the nearest bridge and spit over it. It was then that I realised the inestimable boon of the cinema for those willing to take advantage of it, and how wrong those high-brows are who bleat against the cinema because as an instrument of culture it might be better than it is. Quite seriously, I am prepared to defend the position that it is better that yokels and chaw-bacons in Scotland, England, or any other country should have a false notion of culture rather than none at all. I always like that story about the air of the American prairies being so fresh because in the Middle West the farmers sleep with their windows shut. Those gleaming coruscations in which Miss Bennett and her like appear will at least suggest to the

country mind that in the polite world ladies weighing down their ears with diamonds the size of pigeons' eggs have previously washed behind them. Unless, of course, they belong to the school of that English musical-comedy and film star from whose recent beauty hints I cull the following : " Lots of people do not wash their faces, but it will not harm the skin in the least if you do wash it, provided the water is soft and a good make of soap is used—but make sure no soap is left on."

More seriously, one wishes that there were some means of indicating to the unsophisticated mind that many films admirable in their entertainment value have really no sort of relation to any kind of life. One cannot deny that the American gangster films are as likely to be true as not, because nothing in the film world can exceed the facts as recently set forth in Mr Collinson Owen's book on Chicago thugdom. But how about English gangster films ? I have in mind *The Man They Couldn't Arrest* which I saw at the New Gallery just prior to sitting down to write this article. Is it feasible that an English stockbroker (Mr Nicholas Hannon) should be a leading spirit in the Black Pearl Gang whose chief (Mr Robert Farquharson) is a villainously bearded compound of Lenin and King Herod ? The hero (Mr Hugh Wakefield) has invented an extraordinary instrument rather like the big drum at the Queen's Hall, whereby and with the aid of various electrical devices he can listen-in to any conversation taking place anywhere. But where does the reader think that drum and those devices are situated ? Why, in the very building in which, close to Sicilian Avenue, Bloomsbury, the most estimable, nay, magnanimous firm of accountants which has ever existed protects me hourly from those hyenas and jackals who in the guise of Income Tax collectors pretend to serve their country ! How often have I not in dejection toiled up those stairs and hopefully bounded down them ! And I am asked to believe that across the landing and within earshot of the consolatory sanctum events happen at which Edgar Wallace would deem himself staggered ! The one real person in the film is Mr Gordon Harker, who has one of the super-best moments of a superb career. Ambushed in a thicket of holly, Mr Harker has seen murder committed. "No sound emerges from his mouth opened in horror, but you see from his lips that he is trying to say " Blimey ! " It only remains to add that the heroine is in love with the man whom she believes to have murdered her father. Shall she, or shall she not, surrender him to the police ? This is a moral titbit over which Clytemnestra and Andromache, Cassandra, Electra, and all the other Greek hags would have wrangled themselves silly. But the

heroine of this film does nothing of the sort. Instead, she retires to her robing apartment, whence she emerges in a gown of white samite, mystic, wonderful. Or possibly it is only our old friend, satin beauté. Anyhow, it is white and with yards of train which, when you come to think of it, is rum wear for mourning. On the whole, a very good film which was succeeded by a lesson on the niblick by Mr Bobby Jones. This was so wildly dull that, insanely keen golfer though I am, I fled precipitately, unfortunately butting in the darkness into the stomach of an old gentleman of ninety-two whose use for golf-courses should be drawing to an end. I have said this film was dull, but that is perhaps because I know about niblick play. If it had only been the half-shot with the No. 2 iron . . .

### 33. *Concerning the Low-brow*

January 20, 1932.

BEFORE CONSIDERING OUR OLD FAVOURITE, Greta Garbo, in a new film—or should I say the new Greta in an old film?—there are one or two reflections which I should like to offer on the old subject of the low-brow, his cause and cure. The first question we ought to ask ourselves is: Who wants him to be cured, anyway? The poet Tennyson said, in a moment of unjustifiable optimism, that we needs must love the highest when we see it. But love, surely, was the wrong word—respect was what he meant, only it wouldn't scan! We only really love the things for which we are willing to lay out our hard-earned cash. We respect the plays of Shakespeare, but our half-crowns go to swell the coffers of "It's a Girl!" We respect the oratorios of Bach. But let them give the sublimest work of that master on Monday, and on Tuesday engage the Swanee Syncopators to perform in a salmon-pink lighting low-brow salmon-pink jazz, "and I will bet anybody the biggest and noisiest saxophone in New York City, and pay the hire of a gold-toothed nigger to carry it about, that I will name correctly which audience will exceed the other by ten thousand. Doubtless chamber music of an austere and lofty sort was composed for the harp, sackbut, and shawm; I have no certain information, but Mr Dolmetsch will know. But I have not the least manner of doubt that the three instruments in

syncopation would have drawn a bigger crowd. Times change, but the box-office is eternal. Sincerity in the matter of the Saturday half-crown was as rampant in the days of the early Philistines as in the days of Keith Prowse. I pity the poor Philistines in this, that they have never had anybody to defend them. We hear their case from the Israelite point of view only. Then, taking a leap, we find the word used by Swift to denote that most objectionable of created beings—a bailiff. Next, Matthew Arnold comes along with his scornful : “ On the other side of beauty and taste, vulgarity ; on the side of morals and feeling, coarseness ; on the side of mind and spirit, unintelligence—this is Philistinism.” Only, of course, a modern writer would use not the word “ Philistine ” but “ low-brow,” which any half-wit can understand. “ Low-brow ! ” is the epithet hurled by the *cognoscenti* at the man of average education and taste who does not see eye to eye with the specialist in matters of art. “ Low-brow ! ” would be the high-brow thing to say of a salesman in an Oxford Street store who failed to appreciate the ultimate finesse of a cartoon by Peter Arno, or the last fine shade in a poem by T. S. Eliot. It is nothing to the high-brow that the salesman may perceive infinities of subtlety in Tom Webster’s account of his last adventure at “ Ally Pally ” or Stamford Bridge. No, your salesman is a low-brow. Your high-brow cannot conceive the existence of people who care less than nothing that to T. S. Eliot the leaves of the silver birch are like hot-water bottles glistening under the gas-jet in the scullery. No, the man’s a low-brow. Away with him ! It is much if the high-brow will allow him to breathe, eat, drink, and pay income tax. And he would sterilise him and his kind if he could. But there is this to be said for the people who prefer the programmes of the *Swanee Syncopators* to those of the *London Symphony Orchestra*, that they do honestly prefer them and will put down their money to prove it. There is no record of a tired business man being dragged sulkily by some wife, anxious to be in the musical swim, to some jazz concert which he must moodily endure. Let it be remembered, too, that the work of the world is done by the common run of people, by the low-brows who deem “ The Silver King,” and not “ Strange Interlude,” to be the world’s best play ; “ Faust,” and not “ Roussalka,” to be the world’s best opera ; “ Derby Day ” to be a better picture than Van Gogh’s “ Field at Arles ” ; and “ David Copperfield ” to be head and shoulders above Mr Aldous Huxley’s choicest sneer.

Not only do the low-brows do most of the world’s work, but they pay for most of the world’s amusement. It is only right, then, that

the purveyors of amusement should purvey that which will amuse people who really pay. If this maxim be accepted, then it stands to reason that *The Rise of Helga* at the Empire is an admirable film, since it is entirely composed of those misunderstandings and misconceptions which have ensured popularity from time immemorial. Helga (Miss Garbo) is a wild, untamed thing who, falling in love with one Rodney (Mr Clark Gable), a backwoodsman also wild and untamable, is compelled by the strangest circumstance to become the mistress of a circus proprietor and a wealthy New York architect, not to mention other base fellows by whom she did ascend. Rodney is not going to stand for this and so goes mining in Puerto Pablo or some such place. Helga follows in the guise of dance partner in cabaret brothels, the audience luxuriating in pity of such well-intentioned degradation. But after half an hour of our luxuriating, Helga reveals the fact that it was only when she was rising that she sinned, and that since she has dropped down the social and professional ladder her conduct has been chaster than that of any daisy. Nothing can exceed Rodney's disbelief, or for that matter ours, since Helga, as impersonated by Miss Garbo, hasn't the faintest notion of either singing or dancing. Wherefore I confess that how Helga managed to keep her job at these establishments escapes me. Penultimately, a most engaging millionaire offers Helga his soul, body, and estate, including yacht, and Helga says 'he is the nicest man she has ever met, excepting Rodney, whom she intends to follow to his bug-infested swamp. Whereupon Rodney says that it will be a tough life and that he will expect Helga to cook, sew, and be "of a nice morality, split my windpipe!"' as the fop said in the old play. Only, from what we know of Rodney, we gather that if there is to be any splitting of windpipes it will be hers! And so the dusk pinkly descends, and four lips unite in one long glutinous kiss.

This film is good for its purpose because neither hero nor heroine at any moment behaves like a sentient human being, because any straight answer to any straight question would have brought the picture to an end at any moment, because love paid for by degradation is the most enticing of the world's plots, and because there is nothing more comforting than a heroine who turns out not to be so black as she has carefully painted herself. The picture is good for the further reason that it covers a lot of ground and refreshes the eye with circuses, cabarets, and the like while our minds are resting. It is good because Mr Gable is excellent at the kind of job who is Rodney. As far as Miss Garbo is concerned it is not so good, since when La Garbo is not queening it

she is miserably out of place. Incredibly also, for in the way of normal temptation La Garbo in dethronement is about as alluring as an iceberg. She has none of the warm humanity by which La Dietrich made *Morocco* —a much better picture—come alive, and as an actress La Chatterton seems to me to knock La Garbo silly. There is this further aspect, that whereas Greta "ensky'd and sainted" is among the most heavenly of our Northern Lights, as a trull in homespun she is very nearly a fright. Except for her nose, the end of which still gives better actresses something to think about !

### *34. Pabst Goes Down the Mine*

*March 16, 1932.*

LET ME BEGIN MY IMPRESSIONS of Pabst's great mining film, *Kameradschaft*, at the Academy Theatre, by recalling two instances of the English theatre's handling of a similar subject. The first occurred in a play in which the hero could not be persuaded to marry the heroine because of his alleged deficiency in the manlier virtues. He was the village squire, and the butler bringing in the port also brought in the news that the mine of which the squire was the proprietor had fallen in, whereby endangering the lives of the village's entire male population. Tapping had been heard but there was no one on hand, said the butler with a discreet cough, to effect the necessary rescue. The next scene showed the squire breaking through a coal seam, obviously constructed out of canvas, and emerging into the light of the safety lamps in immaculate evening dress and without so much as a grain of coal dust on his spotless shirt front. Whereupon he returned to the Hall, leaving instructions that the rescued miners were to be stood treat below stairs and, with hands which it had not been necessary to wash, embraced the relenting heroine. I take that to be the English theatre at its worst. Now, consider another case. This was the moving melodrama of "Old Bill." That veteran, together with Alf and Bert, was also in grave danger. The mine was flooding, and the trio began to sing hymns. Higher and higher the water rose till it almost reached their lips. There was a pause in the hymn-singing, and I can still hear a stifled sob which came from somebody in the Lyceum gallery. Then Alf said to Bert : "

say, Bert, is your feet gettin' damp?" I take this to be the English theatre at almost its best.

The reader will note, however, that in each case the emotion was individual. This is not Pabst's way, the whole point of *Kameradschaft* being the manifestation of emotion among communities, in this case the French and German nations. The film is based on the great French mining accident which occurred in 1906, and the better to effect his purpose Pabst has transferred the incident to a mine situated on the borders of the Ruhr, and worked on each side of a dividing barrier by miners belonging to the two countries. "Ethical, not aesthetic values make up the significance of this film," says Pabst, and that, of course, is why it is comparatively dull. This is not the opinion of my colleagues. Miss Lejeune sees in this film an example of Pabst's discovery that the psychology of the mass is "more absorbing than the psycho-analysis of the individual." Mr Sydney Carroll lays about him, saying: "These adjectives are puerile applied to such a superlative creation as this. It would be impossible to exaggerate its significance aesthetically and ethically." In fact, Mr Carroll is so much moved that he bursts into French: "Les Allemandes! Incroyable!" For myself what is *incroyable* is that my old friend should have believed all these German miners to be females! The film critic of "The Times," with greater sobriety and, I think, greater wisdom, notes that the film accepts "almost for the first time an industrial scene as it really is, and without any of those devices which photographers use to make such a scene look either like an old master or like a far too dramatic impressionist picture." In other words, there isn't much camera art as distinct from camera craft in it. Personally, I found the old man's search for his grandson moving.

But I am not going to pretend that this film is in any way soul-searing, or that it moved me nearly as much as a novel I recently read concerning mining life in Derbyshire. There is a certain amount of symbolism in the breaking down of the grille which separates the two mines, and in its rebuilding at the end of the film. But this does not seem to me a particularly staggering achievement. Nor do I believe that the frontier guards, who must have been aware of the explosion, would have misunderstood the two lorry loads of German rescuers. What is much truer is Pabst's recognition of the French habit of breaking out into flags and oratory on even the saddest occasions. The film begins with the French and Germans making poor show of neighbourliness in a frontier café, and I think a much more convincing irony would have been shown if we had seen the rescued and their rescuers resuming

unneighbourliness. I am sorry that my appreciation of this film should appear to be so grudging. The film, of course, is admirable in many ways, but it did not succeed in removing from my mind the conviction that Pabst, though an honest fellow, is dull. Miss Lejeune tells us that "up till the time of the talkies Pabst was one of the most intent, specialised, and frigidly observant directors in Europe, but his expression was thwarted, and with it, curiously, his thought. Sound came to Pabst as a vast liberation. He graduated with it from the dissecting-room to the world of living men." For the life of me I cannot put the film as high as all this. Either a picture is good or bad, and I cannot see how one deduces that the photographer who put it together is thwarted in this direction or that. Mr George Graves is a terrible fellow when "thwarted," and so was Bunthorne. But Pabst's thwartings—and I should like to hear Miss Lejeune pronounce that!—must remain, so far as I am concerned, his own affair. She also tells me that "the film is packed from end to end with shots that refuse to budge out of your memory." Perhaps I was in singularly unreceptive mood that afternoon; the shots that I remember best were those of some hilarious fish in the subsequent Mickey Mouse film! Corroboration is to hand in the following. Miss Elsie Cohen, the extremely clever directress of what is far and away our best picture house, put at my disposal a quantity of "stills" for the purposes of illustration on this page, and to my regret and dismay I did not find that any one of them was possessed of any decorative value whatever. Now *Earth* was a different matter, since many of the shots in that film still remain in my recollection though it is months since I saw it, while those of *Kameradschaft* have already vanished.

The larger film theatres provide greatly varied entertainment. Thus at the Empire the two Barrymores are featured in *Arsène Lupin*, and whether one prefers John's profile or Lionel's proficiency is after all a matter of individual taste. At the Plaza there is a version of Mr Frank Vosper's *Murder on the Second Floor*, as to which it shall be safely said that this potpourri retains all the charm of its author's variegated imaginings. At the Carlton there is *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and I should like to suggest that it should be made illegal to trot out any further version of this hackneyed story for another twenty years. There is a much better and lesser-known story by Stevenson called *The Pavilion on the Links*. Why not have a shot at that? At the Tivoli there is something called *Delicious* in which Miss Janet Gaynor falls in love, strange to say, with Mr Charles Farrell! One of these days I suppose one will see

Mr Farrell rejecting the advances of Miss Gaynor, but I also suppose that it will be the day on which our Mr Marshall declines the attentions of our Miss Best. And not before.

## 35. *Marlene and Child*

November 9, 1932.

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE OF SEX was when, at the age of seven, I embraced a little girl of six at a children's party and in the cloakroom. It is from the fact that this important event happened in the cloakroom that I deduce our respective ages, since we must both have been at the age when, as Sir James Barrie very nearly put it, children are such little darlings that one cloakroom may serve for both kinds. I remember, too, that the young lady, whose name was Flossie, had spurned me throughout the entire evening and that I had the sense to attribute my ultimate conquest to the fact that she was drunk on trifle. Anyhow we embraced, and for the first time it occurred to me that life might as well end there as it could have nothing further to offer. I saw the lady once again, a month or two later. She ignored my salute coldly, and when I endeavoured to ingratiate myself by feeding the same swan, moved away and fed another. On returning from my walk I had little appetite for tea, rejecting everything except cake. And thus concluded the only amorous adventure of my infancy, since a few weeks later I was sent to school where, being a little boy and not put into uniform, one had other things to do besides fall in love with the assistant masters. After that and until I was out of my teens I had no other mistress save Lorna Doone.

Of course there were times, principally at Christmas, when I was unfaithful to Lorna. There was the evening when one was taken to the Christmas pantomime and was only prevented from dying out of hand, stabbed to the heart by some little lady of the chorus with eyelashes like the petals of dog-daisies, by the fact that there were some forty others just as desirable and as worshipful, and because a sense of the ridiculous kept one from dying for several people at once. Then there was the circus, and what little boys thought about equestriennes with limbs more flowing than their horses' manes has been described by Kenneth Grahame

beyond baser emulation. Sometimes I wonder exactly what it is that at a circus attracts little girls. Can it be the circus master with manners even glossier than his shirt front? Or is it yonder slip of an acrobat whose plastered hair, receding forehead, and undoubted squint are compensated by peach-coloured thighs and unimpeachable virility? Whatever be the answer it is certain that little boys and girls do not connect either the pantomime or the circus with sex. It is just as certain that their parents do, which is one of the reasons why parents are so singularly diligent at satisfying their children's need of Christmas entertainment.

Sitting at the Plaza the other afternoon and watching Marlene Dietrich in her new film, *Blonde Venus*, I came to the conclusion that cinema fans are all children in this, that they do not connect sex with their notions of star worship. I came to the further conclusion that they are all children in this also, that any kind of story will do. A child will say: "Daddy, tell me a story." It does not say: "Daddy, tell me a good story"—or an intelligent story, or a story conceived by an adult mind. It just asks to be told something. So it is with cinema fans who, when they go to the pictures, ask to be shown the Garbo or the Dietrich or the Dressler in some story, no matter how foolish. But in the legitimate theatre the same sort of thing used to prevail. There never was any greater mistake than to suppose that Irving's long reign at the Lyceum was due to his appearance in the plays of Shakespeare. Irving reigned despite Shakespeare and because elderly clergymen about to visit the metropolis would bid their spouses look in the "Daily Telegraph" to see what dear Sir Henry was playing, hoping for "The Bells," but if the worst came to the worst, prepared to put up with "Hamlet." The reason some writers beat about the bush is that they are trying to say something and not succeeding. What I am trying not to say is that the Plaza, the charming house of entertainment in which I have spent so many happy hours, presented last week one of the foolishest farragoes into which genius like the Dietrich's has ever been inveigled. The story begins with the Dietrich pretending to be an American cabaret star, which is unthinkable. Marlene can be a star of cabaret on condition that that star is Russian, or Andalusian, or even Icelandic. She can never be American because the pert and the common are not in her repertoire. She has a husband who is consumptive or something of the sort, and in order that he may be sent to a clinic in Europe she gives herself, body and no soul, to some cad. Six months later the husband returns from Europe, cured, discovers the truth, and demands his child. Whereupon La Dietrich, clutching it to her bosom,

embarks upon a flight which takes her across half America, through cheap music-halls and dens of vice, farmyards and haystacks, always penniless and in each shot rigged out with a different set of clothes. The chase ends at Chattanooga, which shows that the Americans have no sense of humour, where in what appears to be a dove-cot La Dietrich surrenders to a cooing detective. The husband, reclaiming his child, parts with fifteen hundred dollars, which the Dietrich then hands to the first down-and-out she encounters in that doss-house to which people possessed of fifteen hundred dollars are inevitably reduced. She is also drunk, or gives a wretched imitation of it, proposing to drown herself, and, a convenient river flashing upon the screen, we see her two seconds later as the rage of revue in Paris, meeting her former seducer, and declining to accompany him to New York, where the next shot shows her kneeling by her infant's bedside ! The fact that the infant was not dying of pneumonia is the only good point about this picture.

The truth is that if this is a film of anything it is a film of mother-love and that Marlene as a mother is not in her element—a statement from which I shall not budge though somebody writes to tell me that in private life she has eight children. Nor do I think that anybody quite looks upon her as a flesh-and-blood mistress or in any light other than that of an extraordinarily lovely woman whose beauty is as inviolate as the rose. I believe that men and women gazing on her are affected exactly as children are by their enchantresses of the Christmas pantomime. It is, strictly, enchantment and therefore has nothing to do with actuality and all the unloveliness which attends real love. In my view the best thing in this film was the acting of Mr Herbert Marshall, who for the first time in his life had something bigger than himself to play up against. He rose to the occasion as one always knew he must, and because he is a much better actor than the tea-cup drama has allowed us to suppose. I thought the production dreadful and can see no reason why nearly all of the scenes should take place in grottoes.

## 36. *Chinoiserie*

March 22, 1933.

I SUPPOSE EVERYBODY KNOWS LESS about China than about any other country. Possibly this includes the Chinese themselves, whose alleged inability to understand one another is the one thing which prevents; or so we are given to understand, the overrunning of white and black races by the yellow. On what is the average person's knowledge of China based? I shall say first of all on the Willow Pattern cup and saucer with which the nursery of every thinking child is or should be furnished. A little later comes the time when we first read Lamb's essay on Old China with its account—I quote from memory—of the little lady who in any occidental scheme of perspective must be stepping into the middle of yonder river. Then perhaps we go to school, or somebody gives us a volume of French verse, and we read Gautier's delicious poem, beginning : "Celle que j'aime à présent est en Chine." After that all is *chinoiserie*. Perhaps we read a book like "Le Jardin des Supplices," which is one of the few books which have reduced me to a state of dithering, fascinated horror. What sort of country, one reflects, is this which combines unbelievable and revolting cruelty with the most exquisite sensitiveness in the arts? I never yet saw a Chinese juggler who did not make play with things which were not in themselves lovely to look upon, whereas your English juggler almost invariably conceives dexterity in terms of cigar, top hat, and umbrella, three of the ugliest appendages of the human figure. The Chinese umbrella is a thing of beauty, though possibly useless; the opposite is the case with your European counterpart. I am willing to believe that China in itself is a very dull place, and I base my reason upon "The Arabian Nights," the wealth and extravagance of whose imagery was necessitated by the very meagreness of the subjects on which they were employed. Even our English versifiers have been reduced to this expedient when dealing with the barren material of the East, and everybody knows that "cool Siloam's shady rill" is actually a mere stinking puddle. From the number of poets abounding in China I gather that the place is exceedingly flat, for the simple reason

that Switzerland has never produced a poet of any sort, and this because it has never had to. The death-blow to any sensible English view of China was, of course, dealt by Sidney Jones in "San Toy," though he only followed the fashion set by Gilbert and Sullivan and himself who in "The Mikado" and "The Geisha" had demolished any reasonable notion of China's neighbour. Lamb, Gautier, Mirbeau, Gilbert, Jones—what sort of country can it really be of which these are the predominant factors?

I have a friend who is somebody or other at Peking, the kind of person against whom Boxers rise, and who in times of danger has to be conveyed by aeroplane from a residency to a battleship with steam up. He sends me photographs of streets in Shanghai which are indistinguishable from Oxford Street when the stores have gone to the expense of a bit of bunting. In my view no public square in China is credible without its public execution. But my friend's snapshots do not show this, and in short I can get out of them no sort of picture of the place. Asked point-blank what China looks like, he will reply: "Oh, just what you would expect!" Well, what do I expect? Let me confess that I expect a country in which young Englishmen, clad in immaculate ducks, climb the garden walls of wealthy mandarins to seduce their daughters, in revenge for which insult the mandarins get hold of those immaculate ducks, the Englishmen's mothers, and demand tit for tat. There is an alternative play—since I will not pretend that "Mr Wu" comprises the whole English drama about China—in which a Viscount from Eton breaks his heart because he may not marry a Chinese Princess, but in the neighbourhood of eleven o'clock has the broken pieces put together again on discovering that the Princess is not Chinese at all but the kidnapped daughter of the Duke of Willesden. There are yet other plays in which Chinese courtesans plunge "razors and carving knives into their gizzards" to foil the schemes of wop gangsters. Others, again, in which bland laundrymen hold posses of police at bay while the broken blossoms of the neighbourhood swim across the river clutching hot-water bottles full of "snow."

The point of the foregoing is that *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, the new film at the Regal, is not like any of it. The picture first establishes a state of civil war. There are no programmes at this theatre and therefore I do not know who has produced the picture. Whoever it is, he has done it extremely well, and the twenty minutes of chaos with which the film begins are more than remarkable. The heroine is a missionary, and Miss Barbara Stanwyck cleverly makes us realise the

contrast between American barbarism and Chinese polish. Miss Stanwyck bandies with the General wit which has the manner of the tobacconist's assistant without the redeeming wit of the matter, and that the General should take offence at the young woman must be put down to the whiteness of her skin, since of other appeal she has not, in my view, any vestige. To save a Chinese child from execution she offers, after much palaver, her virtue to the General, who replies : " You poor fool, I could have had that any time ! " At this I felt inclined to stand on my seat and cheer, not at the capitulation of this particular citadel but because, for very nearly the first time in the entire history of the film industry, a character has said something which was sane, reasonable, and obvious, at the right moment and without making too much fuss about it. After this the film collapsed and we were asked to sympathise with a Chinese bandit drinking poison because he had made spiritual conquest of an English missionary. I do not know any Chinese bandits, but I do not believe this. However, one had the compensation of watching the wind blowing in some nice hair. I thought some of the acting magnificent but have no space in which to record my impression of Miss Stanwyck's. I will merely say that " Celle que j'aime à présent n'est pas en Chine."

## 37. *A Supper of Horrors*

June 7, 1933.

DANDIN, THE JUDGE in Racine's comedy of " Les Plaideurs," suggests to Isabelle that she might like a little distraction. What would she like ? The spectacle of a little torturing ? " Eh, monsieur," says Isabelle, " peut-on voir souffrir des malheureux ? " And Dandin replies : " Cela fait toujours passer une heure ou deux ! " The late A. B. Walkley said with reference to this : " We all have our Guignolite moments, moments of Taine's ' ferocious gorilla ' surviving in civilised man, when we seek the spectacle of torture or physical suffering or violent death ; but we are careful to aesthetise them, refine them into moments of poetry or art. The pleasure of tragedy is aesthetic. Nevertheless, tragedy involves violent death, and without that would be an idle tale. So Rousseau was not altogether wrong when he said we go to a tragedy for the

pleasure of seeing others suffer, without suffering ourselves. Your true Guignolite simply prefers his tragedy 'neat,' without aesthetic dilution. But I think it is unfair to charge him, as he is so often charged, with a love of the horrible for its own sake. I think, rather, that he is moved, a little more actively than the rest of the world, by curiosity." But so far as I am concerned none of these wiseacres has really hit the nail on the head. I suppose that everybody must have his particular reaction to horror. A very charming lady and an exquisite novelist has confessed that she can never see an aeroplane without wishing it would crash. You would say that she can have never seen a crashed plane. Now I have seen a crashed plane and the sight filled me with the utmost horror, yet I still understand what the lady feels when she is looking at an aeroplane, because I feel that way myself. Whenever there is a street accident I hover on the edge of the crowd, afraid to look at what is on the ground yet quite unable to move away. I should probably hate to see horses disembowelled or a matador killed, yet I once saw a bull-fight at Arles in Provence, where the horns of the bull were padded and there was no *mise à mort*. And I remember thinking that the spectacle was tame to the point of revoltingness! My own view of Grand Guignol is that what one enjoys is one's own terror and nothing else. The morbid has an extraordinary attraction for many people, not because they like it but because they fear it. I do not know where the Morgue is in Paris. But I know that if ever I come across it accidentally, I shall spend the day dithering on the doorstep equally unable to go in or to go away.

My difficulty with film thrillers is that normally they do not thrill. There is not in the whole of *King Kong*, for example, one single moment which makes my blood run cold. It is just amusing-nonsense punctuated by such reflections as why, if the natives want to keep the monster on the other side of that wall, they should have built a door big enough to let him through. And why he doesn't climb it, anyhow. On the night I saw this film there was a great deal of laughter provoked by palpable absurdity. On the night I went to *The Mystery of the Wax Museum* at the Regal there was again a great deal of laughter, but it was laughter assumed as a protective armour against fear. The audience was really frightened and took to giggling as an alternative to fainting. Two days later I met Mr Aubrey Hammond, who had just crossed from Paris. He was telling somebody that he had "not got over it yet," and I butted in with something about having always supposed him to be a good sailor. "I don't mean that," said Aubrey, "I mean

a waxworks film I saw in Paris." It turned out that at the very moment when I was watching the film at the Regal, Aubrey was watching it in Paris, both of us being "distilled almost to jelly with the act of fear."

It would not be fair to reveal the plot of this film even if I could disentangle it, which I can't. The important thing is that it has the real charnel-house horror, though it is extraordinarily difficult to say in what that consists. An example comes to my mind. For years I thought that the heads of people who had been guillotined were like the blocks in a barber's window. Then I saw some wax models of heads guillotined during the Revolution and noted how they were all cushioned in billows of muslin reaching high up the back of the neck like a cravat. I then discovered that this was necessary because guillotined heads have no back to them, the knife coming down slantwise just above the ear. Everybody has his own test for horror and this is mine, the point being that whatever your test the film at the Regal will live up to it. There comes a moment when the waxworks show takes fire and you see the coloured effigies melt into a distortion with which actual corruption cannot vie. There is a trifle of fun in a morgue in which pranks are played with dead bodies. Presently the attendants depart and then one of the bodies lifts the sheet itself and reveals a man still living and apparently in the last stage of leprosy. I shall confess that this was the kind of thing I had paid honest money to see and worth all the impossibilities in *King Kong* put together. One might, you see, contract leprosy, and one might come to lie in a morgue, and the business of horror is to push the possible to its farthest limits and then stop. Once a film or play transcends the bounds set by one's reason its whole effect is lost.

There is another astonishing thing about this film. This is that through it runs a vein of fantastic wise-cracking, the main part of the plot being concerned with the efforts of a New York girl reporter to make good. The house laughed at and with her continually, but was always ready to take up the meal of horror where it had left off. I therefore very heartily recommend this film to people with good nerves, though it is hardly the diet for neurotics. It has been brilliantly directed, and the amazing thing is that it should have come out of Hollywood, which seems never to know whether it has got hold of the first-class thing or the tenth-rate, and does both with equal gusto. Mr Lionel Atwill gives an admirable performance and is well supported by the girl reporter, whose name I did not catch. Miss Fay Wray, whose name

I ~~seem~~ to remember from *King Kong*, once more spends the evening in getting quite incredibly out of difficulties into which it is unbelievable that she can have got !

### 38. Hollywood Zola

April 11, 1934.

THE TIVOLI IS SHOWING *Lady of the Boulevards*, a film based upon Zola's "Nana." Whereby hangs a tale, not so much of wonder as of wondering. For what is Zola remembered to-day? Is he remembered as the champion of Dreyfus, though I suspect that anti-Semitic minds still find in that noble campaign the best title to oblivion? Or is he recognised as the third greatest novelist France has ever produced? The field for speculation here opening up is a fascinating one. Every country should have a society for discovering which of its great authors is most dead. The most fitting President for such a society in England would be Mr Max Beerbohm, who once proposed a Veiling Ceremony for bad statues. By analogy there might be something called Ceremony of Despatch to Ultimate Limbo. This would be a Deed of Assignment more amusing than the normal one. Perhaps it would not be always easy to decide which illustrious author is most dead. In England we must, I think, plump for Walter Savage Landor, to whose memory poor dear Earle Welby recently erected some twenty tombstones in the shape of a Memorial Edition, and whose "Imaginary Conversations" remain imaginary because people are content to guess at what is in them. In France the arch-deceased is Chateaubriand. Next to him come the brothers Goncourt. After this there is a tie between Emile Zola and Paul Bourget with this difference: that whereas the first was once magnificently alive and an author dear to the teeming active million, the second was never more than the boudoir companion of fretful ladies with headaches.

I must, however, be getting back to the film at the Tivoli which, it need hardly be said, bears no sort of relation to the novel on which it is founded. The film begins grandly with a shot of the coffin of Nana's mother being lowered into a hole in the working-class corner of some cemetery upon which the tall surrounding tenements grimly

frown. The callousness of the priest and the indifference to what *he* is mumbling are finely done, and one thinks one is in for an evening of Zolaesque horror, glitter, and horror again. But one thinks wrongly. We have a momentary glimpse of Nana washing a floor and announcing a campaign of rapacity. We next see her as the best-looking of three *cocottes* sipping *apéritifs* at some *café*, and we reflect that this is Manet's period and wonder that even Hollywood directors could fail to see that here was the opportunity to reproduce the Paris of that painter. That there has been the flicker of some such notion is evidenced by the two subsidiary *cocottes* who are really brilliantly directed and act brilliantly in accordance with their direction. Nevertheless, except for the absence of motor cars and telephones the atmosphere is that of to-day, the costumes being explained on the ground that everybody is going to a fancy-dress ball. The characters all talk American with such anachronisms as : "It's up to you !" It is now time to remind oneself of what Zola's novel was about. Nana was a daughter of the people who became an actress, not in the police-court sense but one who really appeared on the boards. "The first night of 'The Little Duchess' was," says Zola, "a complete failure. Nana showed herself to be an atrociously bad actress whose pretensions to high comedy tickled the audience so much that they forgot to hiss. But Nana sensed her defeat and, vowing vengeance, proceeded to launch her campaign of imposing herself upon Paris." Zola began his next chapter with a magnificent sentence which I shall not spoil by translating : "Alors, Nana devint une femme chic, rentière de la bêtise et de l'ordure des mâles, marquise des hauts trottoirs." In the end, as readers will remember, Nana died of smallpox, her death-bed presenting a picture of that corruption with which she had infected society.

Of all this the film retains as much as and no more than could be written on my little finger nail. Nana, singing a Blues of 1933, is hailed as a great actress by the Paris public of 1870. Her first-night is a terrific success. Presently we see her as a lady of fashion and popularity who becomes possessed of diamond necklaces for she knows not what reason, and pursues a career blameless except that falling in love with a young officer who is ordered to Algiers, and the post going wrong, she becomes the mistress of his elder brother. The young man returning from Algiers, Nana shoots herself and sinks dying to the ground in a graceful heap of contrition and baby muslin. The picture is a colossal failure for the two directors who have had a go at it, and a success only for Mr Goldwyn, who having groomed and re-groomed Miss Anna Sten,

for eighteen months, has now succeeded in removing from her countenance any trace of expressiveness whatsoever. One remembers Anna as a considerable actress able to suggest raw emotion of the peasant type. Mr Goldwyn has succeeded in removing all trivial fond records that she was ever an actress at all. As Nana she is a mass of glycerined prettiness, and while looking rather more beautiful than Miss Constance Bennett, manages to act not nearly so well as Miss Madeleine Carroll. Occasionally she goes through the motions of acting, as when she is invited to go to the other ends of the earth at a moment's notice. Here Miss Sten flutters to her bedroom, dithers at the foot of her bed in the best Lilian Harvey manner, finally snatches up a boa and flutters downstairs again to the open laughter of the Tivoli audience. Mr. Goldwyn has so far succeeded in remoulding Miss Sten that he has not so much transformed her into an American film star as transmogrified her into a British one. There is, however, a first-class performance by the actor who plays the elder brother. This excellent player is probably Mr Lionel Atwill, and, if so, I must again welcome an actor who is always so transcendently good that I can never remember who he is.

### 39. *Pure Waste*

May 9, 1934.

AT LAST I KNOW the real meaning of montage, that word of blessed import to our younger high-brows. It means expending an enormous amount of time out of proportion not to the result achieved but to the time which one might suppose to be profitably expended. Take that beautiful film at the New Gallery entitled *Man of Aran*. Allowing a week to get to the place, a week to come back, and six weeks to snap the Atlantic Ocean and the islanders plying their humble trades at the edge thereof, you get the sum of two months which would appear to be reasonable. Judge of my horror when I am told that nearly two years were spent in producing this picture. That must mean either that the producer and his camera men were incredibly lazy or that they took hundreds of thousands of shots, 99 per cent of which have been rejected in the film-destroying but soul-preserving

business of montage. One asks whether this isn't a little overdoing it, whether it would not be almost better if the less painstaking method were pursued. Many years ago, before spools were invented and one had to use the old plates, I uscd to take about on my country rambles the unwieldiest of cameras and tripods. I remember carrying this from Rosthwaite over Great Gable and Scafell Pike to Seascalc. But my youthful powers of endurance are not the point. The point is that the following year I took that camera and tripod to Dieppe, of which I made some admirable fishing studies. The following year I saved up enough money to buy a Kodak with which I went to Dinard, where again I made fishing studies. My still better and more important point is that I see very little difference between the results of the two visits and should not be ashamed to show my albums to Mr Michael Balcon, the head of Gainsborough Films, and his producer, Mr Flaherty. Each album contains some twenty-five photographs rather larger than post-card size, and I know I had not the money to buy more than a hundred plates in the one case nor enough film for two hundred shots in the other. Further, my holiday in each case was limited to a fortnight, I had no assistants, in only half a dozen cases did I make my models pose, and I did a great many things on my holidays besides take photographs.

Also I am not at all sure that the film would not have been better if it had all been silent except for the sea, and I have the horrid suspicion that such talk as there was, was recorded at another time and place and then superimposed upon the film, although, of course, the islanders were still the talkers. Normally I am all against the amateur in any branch of entertainment. If there is anything worse than the amateur actor it is the amateur operatic singer, and he or she is exceeded in direness only by the amateur conjurer. But in the film business, in such affairs as Aran Islanders, Breton fisher folk, Esquimaux, South Sea Islanders, and even down or up to Himalayan conquerors, I believe in preserving as much of the amateur spirit as possible. Let the actors be a little clumsy and a little wanting in finish. Let them spit but not polish. Thus and thus only do we get the impression of the real thing as distinct from the doctored work of the studio. In my view art and nature never mix, and that is why a clumsy, hasty shot of some real aviator landing at Croydon after flying from Darwin in twenty minutes is more convincing than the most carefully prepared study of the film hero alighting on the top of Popocatepetl to preserve, shall I say, Miss Fay Wray from Aztec wrath.

I am a little astonished at some of the remarks anent *Man of Aran* which have fallen from the outspoken lips and clear mind of my esteemed friend and colleague, Mr Sydney Carroll. Mr Carroll has told us that in his opinion this film "is a magnificently dull and stupendously futile experiment in high-brow photography. I doubt if it has any box-office appeal whatsoever. It is the kind of film that normally would only be discovered at some Sunday show of the Film Society. It is true that it possesses in a wildly vital way the spirit of conflict, and conflict is the essence of drama ; but, strange to say, although the battle in this picture is the tremendous, never-ceasing struggle between land and sea, between man and the elements, we are never conscious in its progress of drama, but only of danger." I do not understand this. I do not understand how a film in which the spirit of conflict is wildly vital can contain no drama. Would Mr Carroll have deemed this film more dramatic if it had shown us the men of Aran torn between their fishing nets and the still closer mesh and toil of whatever amorous passion may be supposed to exist in that bleak inhospitable latitude ? Would he have preferred the film to show us the rugged unkempt fisherman with one eye on his creels and the other on his neighbour's wife ? But the intention surely was to present a film of honest, simple life by the sea, and in my view this has been achieved wonderfully. Mr Carroll ends by saying that "although I have not much hope of this film being a financial success, I should like to see my belief refuted, for such an unusual and plucky effort does not, in spite of its shortcomings, deserve to fail." Again I do not understand. Surely if anything deserves to fail it is that magnificently dull and stupendously futile experiment in high-brow photography which he began by declaring this film to be.

It is noteworthy that the out-and-out commercial film is showing a rapid decrease in, to coin a word, despicability. The new Tivoli picture, *It Happened One Night*, in which Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert are featured, is a brilliant comedy to which I can award no higher praise than the statement that both the piece and the playing are worthy of Mr Lunt and Miss Fontaine. The film is conceived in a delightful vein of mingled romance and high comedy, and never departs from this vein for a single instant. It is brilliantly directed by Mr Frank Capra, and the supporting cast helps to provide one of the most captivating entertainments in town.

## 40. *"The 'Bounty'" at Last*

*September 12, 1934.*

EVERY ONE OF US has a bee in his bonnet. Take the dramatic critics. Critic A is firmly persuaded that a play has only got to be completely devoid of any interest whatever to be a spiritual masterpiece ; the characters in such a work have discarded their muddy vestures of decay and sit about drawing-rooms in their souls, so to speak. Critic B is all for quietism ; for him an actress has only got to be glum and exploit a face like the back of the kitchen grate to reach the top of fame's ladder. Critic C pretends to be interested in the theatre but in the foyer talks about nothing except driving incredible miles an hour in a fussy little sports car to golf-courses on which he drives incredible distances in incredible directions. In addition to the bee in the bonnet, there is the King Charles's head, and there is a certain dramatic critic who cannot keep Sarah Bernhardt out of his articles ! Apropos of Sarah, I remember a luncheon-party at her house in Paris. The fish was sweet, which Sarah explained was due to her cook being drunk and mistaking the sugar for the salt. Turning to her major-domo she said with the greatest affability : " Tell cook that when one is drunk, one keeps the salt and the sugar at opposite ends of the kitchen ! "

Sometimes I think I have two bees in my bonnet or two King Charles's heads. One is Bernhardt and the other is the " Mutiny of the 'Bounty.' " The reader who does not see how these two cannot be got into the same article, knows nothing about (a) Sarah or (b) me. Some time ago when I was in Brittany it was proposed that I should visit a rock jutting out into the sea, at the end of which was something that was called Sarah Bernhardt's chair. I asked when last she sat in it, and was told a year or two before she died. Now it was obviously impossible to reach this rock except at grave risk to limb, if not life, and my admiration for the valiant old lady increased accordingly. There were no limits to the eyries which this artist could attain in real life, and I do not see any reason why print should set any confines to her boundless energies. Anyhow, here she is in an article which is going to be about the filming of the Mutiny of the "Bounty." For years I have been

suggesting that this remarkable incident in the history of the British Navy should receive the honours of celluloid. In an article on this page less than three months ago, occurs the passage: "What a film! Actually out of forty-seven characters, three are hanged, four drowned in irons, two are murdered by whites, five are murdered by Otaheitans. Cast? Given free hand, I should proceed as follows: Lieutenant Bligh, Wallace Beery; Midshipman Heywood, Robert Montgomery; Lieutenant Christian, Clark Gable; Captain Edwards, George Bancroft; Nessy, any blonde cutie; and the Otaheite darling, any brune ditto." Modestly I cough, clear my throat, and announce the latest film news, which is that Wallace Beery, Robert Montgomery, and Clark Gable have set sail for the South Seas in a ship accurately modelled on the "Bounty." I am not at all sure that there is not a snag here.

When Irving did "Faust" at the Lyceum he took enormous care that his Gates of Nuremberg should be an exact copy of the originals. But so far as I am aware he engaged nobody to see that Wills's melodrama perfectly reproduced the spirit of Goethe's original. I am totally indifferent to the matter of the new "Bounty's" faithfulness to the old; it seems to me to be extraordinarily unimportant, and that a mere approximation would do just as well. What is important is not the "Bounty" but the things which happened in her. In my view the important thing would have been to see that Messrs Beery, Montgomery, and Gable have been provided with a copy of Geoffrey Rawson's "Bligh of the 'Bounty,'" first published in 1932, and of which a cheap reprint is to hand. Bligh's career by no means ended with the "Bounty" any more than it began with it. Born in 1753 at Tinten, in Cornwall, he first served as a midshipman in the "Hunter," the "Crescent," and the "Ranger." After five years in these ships he became navigator and marine surveyor to Cook and so took part in the famous voyage of the "Resolution" and the "Discovery." Bligh's name is mentioned in the last entry of Cook's journal. He fought under Admiral Hyde-Parker at the Dogger Bank. After the affair of the "Bounty" he fought under Duncan at Camperdown and was next astern to Nelson at Copenhagen. Nelson in the "Elephant" was in command, and the "Glatton," commanded by Bligh, bore with the "Elephant" the heat and burden of the day. After Nelson had nailed his colours to the mast and signalled that the rest of his fleet should do likewise, the tide of battle turned. "At 2.45," wrote Bligh, "the action may be said to have ended. Lord Nelson in the 'Elephant,' our second ahead, did me the honour to hail me to come aboard and thank me for the conduct of the 'Glatton,'"

It is well said of Bligh that while not among the greatest sea captains, "he has a place in the great gallery of English seamen who, with all their faults and shortcomings, yet had sterling virtues." What more is there to be said? A great deal, but I shall mention only the fact that one of Bligh's amatory exploits in Tahiti figures in a poem by, of all people, Mary Russell Mitford:

His passion soared on' eagle wing,  
He loved the sister of the king.

I hope the trio in the new "Bounty" are putting this little book in their pipes and smoking it.

## 41. *On the Way to Wimpole Street*

October 24, 1934.

WRITING OF CECIL B. DE MILLE's *Cleopatra*, our youngest and therefore cleverest film critic says: "Most intelligent people like sometimes to take an evening off and enjoy two hours of blood, lust, and elephants." The young man is quite right. The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, and what the horny-handed sons and daughters of toil want to behold at that hour is lowing herds winding slowly o'er the lea. Only the herds should be elephants and the lea may as well be the Nubian desert, while in each gaily caparisoned howdah sits a gorgeously bedizened houri whom an Assyrian chief, clad in a leopard skin, amorously pursues. I have long come to the conclusion that the function of the film is twofold. Its smaller and less important function is to provide entertainment for high-brows gathered together in small cinemas, while its larger and weightier job is to amuse the million gathered under domes and cupolas. That this is the view held by the film companies themselves is proved by the advance literature they send out. Toeplitz Productions Ltd. have just favoured me with the staggering information that in the film *The Dictator*, now being put together, "Madeleine Carroll made her début on the floor wearing a gorgeous satin nightgown." I imagine that to people who can afford satin nightgowns, such a piece of news must seem the most exquisite bosh. It is as though somebody were to tell me that Clive Brook, when

he makes his first appearance in this film, will be wearing real silk vest and pants. In my time I have tried real silk underwear and real linen sheets, and found both cold and clammy ; give me wool and cotton every time. Whether or not your ploughman dreams of silk underwear, I am persuaded that the waking thoughts of your milkmaid are uniquely directed upon satin nightgowns because she knows she will never have one. All newspapers know this. Society paragraphs are entirely written for those who are not in Society, since the Upper Ten are too few in number to make those paragraphs worth while. That is why we read such paragraphs as : " Bim, of Regent Street, tells me of a cute little idea for *robes de nuit* carried out in pale pastel and egg-shell blue, powdered with wurzel flummery. Too perfectly delicious, seems to me. A light wrap of umber-coloured duvetyn may, she adds, be worn round the shoulders whilst switching off the electric light." Where is the newspaper which will have the courage to inform me that " Liza of 953A New Cut, S.E., is showing a wonderful *costume de nuit* in *calicot de coton*, secured at the waist with a *morceau* of *ficelle*. This material has the advantage of washing quite perfectly. A tippet of shredded coco-nut matting may be worn whilst blowing out the dip." But I digress, if a person can be said to digress who has not started out in any particular direction !

The direction I ought to start in is, of course, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* at the Empire. I remember, by the way, an awful moment at the microphone when, in a fit of absent-mindedness, I broadcast the title of this play as " The Wimpoles of Barrett Street." In fact I went on talking of the play by this name, and so far as I know, nobody ever noticed it. The first thing to be said is that Norma Shearer once more proves what an excellent actress she is. She gives you the feeling that the character impersonated has mind and, moreover, that this mind might very well be that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The part is almost entirely on one note, yet Norma has sufficient skill to put off monotony. Fredric March's Browning is just a joke in so far as he must be supposed to represent the poet. He is a good, straightforward, manly lover, though we feel that the intricacies of " Mary had a little lamb " would be beyond him. Charles Laughton is, of course, extraordinarily effective as old Barrett. It is not my intention to revive an ancient controversy or to discuss what was the view taken of Barrett by Mr Besier when he wrote his play. But there can be no doubt as to the view taken by Mr Laughton when it comes to acting the part. There may or may not be truth in the picture Mr Laughton presents of

an inhibited, desire-racked ogre, and to what extent a playwright is entitled to qualify or distort the character of an actual person who can be identified is a matter of taste on which we shall all have our opinions. Personally, if a man traduced, say, my grandmother, I should, if he were small, kick him all the way from Westminster Abbey to St Paul's, and if he were big, hit him from behind with a brick. But there is no doubt that Sir Cedric Hardwicke's acting in the play and Mr Laughton's in the film—acting which got and gets over despite any lines that may have been modified or withdrawn—give this play an aesthetic unity and reason for existence. (The only difference that I can see between the two impersonations is that one Barrett was thin and nasty while the other is fat and nasty.)

What, in my view, it comes to is this. There is no polite justification for traducing old Barrett, and there isn't any play if you don't. A third way would have been to take the story and pretend it had nothing to do with Barretts and Brownings, in which case, of course, nobody would have gone near the piece. Discarding the questions of aesthetic right and polite wrong, the fact remains that an enormous sum was made out of the play and is going to be made out of the picture ; which is probably the best solution of all difficulties. My only adverse criticism of the film is that it is a trifle slow and long-drawn-out. Actually I was never bored, though I spent two hours thinking that in the next five minutes I should be.

## 42. "*Bengal Lancer*"

February 13, 1935.

DURING THE COURSE of last summer I indulged in one of those melancholy affairs known as a pleasure cruise, part of the ritual of which is to get off at Gibraltar and take a taxi ride round that dull protuberance. As it happened, the taxi-driver spoke English, and, with that tact which guides the native in any part of the world in his intercourse with the touring English, complimented me on my country, which he said was grand. I asked him what part of England he found grand, and he replied : "Barrow-in-Furness." It was on the same trip that my, and everybody's, good friend George Bishop said on sighting

Talgier : "Not my view of Africa!" These two incidents came into my mind as I pushed my way through the crowds besieging the Carlton Theatre. It was half-past six, an hour when it is difficult to understand how anybody can be in a mood for romantic entertainment. Either one has done a hard day's work or one hasn't. If one has, one should be on one's way home for a labourer's kipper, a middle-class high tea, or the ortolans and early asparagus of the expensive classes. If one isn't one of the world's workers, then six o'clock is the hour when one's man, waking one from one's siesta, consults one in the matter of one's evening's studs and waistcoat buttons. Nevertheless, there was an enormous crowd at the Carlton even at this untoward hour, which only proves that really first-class entertainment is entirely independent of the clock. Round about one were attendants in the garb of Bengal Lancers and looking as much like them as the Gibraltar taxi-driver's view of England, and mine of India, correspond to the real thing. What do they know of England who only know Barrow-in-Furness? What do they know of India except that it abounds in coral strands as liberally as London rejoices in the tea-shops of Messrs Lyons? I suppose my knowledge of India is entirely confined to the novels of Flora Annie Steel and the early works of Mr Kipling. Some little time ago I questioned a friend who had spent a good deal of time over there in connection with some industrial concern, and asked him what India was really like. He thought for a bit, then answered : "It is like Ashton-under-Lyne, only hotter!" and the photographs he produced, which were principally of the interiors of cotton mills in Bombay, bore out his statement remarkably well. I asked him about the natives and he said : "After a time you don't notice them." But just as all England is not like Barrow, so I am prepared to believe that all India is not like Bombay. To be perfectly accurate as to my sources of information about this country, let me confess to having read the works of a well-known lady novelist whose name I forget, but whose novels all seem to have been written while sitting in a howdah. I know that the chap who keeps the fan going is called a punkah-wallah, and that you don't drink whiskey till after sundown. And that's all.

I am more than convinced that the virgin soil of a mind such as mine is best fitted to receive a picture like *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. Did I know anything at all of the country I might be prepared to question the unlikelihood, not to say idiocy, of an English Colonel unaware that his son was at Sandhurst, and declining to hold any communication other than military with that son dumped on him as unexpectedly

as Raleigh was dumped on Stanhope in Mr Sherriff's play. Fortunately I am not in a position to question this, or to disbelieve in a story compounded of pig-sticking and intrigue on the North-West Frontier. Nothing pleases an English film audience more than to see an Englishman get out of a tight corner, particularly if that Englishman is played by an American film star. Crack as this regiment is, it follows that the corner must be of the tightest. Now nothing equals the Englishman's resource in moments of spectacular difficulty, always excepting the ingenuity with which he gets into that difficulty. Your Bengal Lancer is no exception, and perhaps the thing is made easier for him when the villainous native prince keeps in his train a beautiful Russian lady, who, to anybody not being an actor in a film, has "decoy" written all over her. The kernel of the intrigue is the safe delivery to a friendly ruler of two million rounds of ammunition, and the interception of it by the hostile one. If the villainous Mohammed Khan can find out when and where the ammunition is to be delivered he will be able to ambush and entrap the Lancers who are convoying it. First he arranges for the Colonel's son to be lured away from the camp, whereby two other subalterns, directly disobeying the Colonel's orders, plan to rescue him. This is the weakest part of the film, for I just do not believe in the power of British tommies successfully to disguise themselves as Indians among Indians for thirty seconds, much less several hours. Both are captured but successfully resist torture, which is, however, too much for the Colonel's son. We then get to the position when the three are in a dungeon conveniently provided with a window overlooking the place where the diverted ammunition has been stored and within earshot of the arrangements made to greet the Colonel with his Lancers now in full pursuit. But as every reader of English books for English boys knows—and personally I think that Marryat, Ballantyne, Henty, Mayne Reid, and Rider Haggard show up the modern thriller for the silly trash it is—stone walls do not a prison make when the prisoners are three intrepid American movie stars. What could be simpler than to procure the cartridges to blow open the prison door, and the means of igniting them, or to explode the two million rounds of ammunition when nobody is looking? What schoolboy has not in imagination leaped from a battlement on to the crupper of his arch-enemy's horse, rolled him in the dust, and helped him to bite it by plunging a dagger into his back? The film ends with the Colonel, not knowing who betrayed him, distributing the dals all round.

The poverty of this story is redeemed by the brilliance of its photo-

raphy, direction, and acting. The playing of Gary Cooper, Franchot Tone, Sir Guy Standing, Aubrey Smith, and Richard Cromwell is superb, and once or twice it seems almost as though the expenditure of time and money had been justified. I do not mean justified as a commercial proposition. But is it, or is it not, a crazy thing from the point of view of civilisation to spend upon one picture an amount of time and money more than sufficient to build and equip a National Theatre? I don't know the answer. Better, perhaps, ask if the film is a faithful transcript of Major Yeats-Brown's book. But, alas, I don't know the answer to that either!

### 43. *Turkey, Mr Gladstone, and Minor Matters*

*March 13, 1935.*

EVERY FEW OF THE VISITORS to the Regal are likely to carry their minds back to European politics of the Gladstone era, always presuming that they have any minds to carry and that their horizons are not limited by the dance palaces at Hammersmith, Holloway, Hoxton, or Herne Hill. I should imagine that the younger generation knows as much about Gladstone as it does about Messrs Hansom and Macadam, though, to be sure, the Gladstone bag is now as demodeed as the Gladstone collar. Nevertheless, among the fogeys and greybeards who were present at the opening performance, there must have been some who remembered how, at the end of last century, the Grand Old Man stumped the country, making himself a Grand Old Nuisance. Nothing that Queen Victoria or any of her visitors could do availed to muzzle this octogenarian hothead, simultaneously quavering with age and quivering with passion. I hope it is not flippant to say that Armenian atrocities, meaning the massacres performed by the Turks at the expense of the Armenians, were almost more real to the old man than they were to the victims themselves, and I do not suppose it ever occurred to him to ask how the Turks would have fared if the Armenians had been the more numerous and more powerful race. All the time that Gladstone was preaching this crusade which never happened, Abdul the Damned

sat on his throne pretending to smile while being in his heart of hearts probably the most pitiful, abject, and terror-ridden despot that ever existed, since in the constant fear of the dagger, the stranglehold, or the poisoned meal he could never be said to enjoy life. Perhaps the best picture of the old man is given in some lines of D. H. Lawrence addressed to the mosquito :

I behold you stand  
 For a second clasped in oblivion,  
 Obscenely ecstasied  
 Sucking live blood,  
 My blood,  
 Such silence, such suspended transport,  
 Such gorging,  
 Such obscenity of trespass.

To the average Englishman, Turkey before the war meant no more than the place which sold him Turkish sweetmeats and cigarettes ; the truth would have shown him a world revolving round a hub which was Constantinople, with England no more than a hearsay island academically ruled by octogenarian windbags, apparently unaware that objectionable minorities daring to survive must expect to have atrocities practised on them. To us, in 1914, war was the matter of a broken treaty ; to the Turk it was a local and inevitable consequence of the struggle for half a dozen national existences. We are inclined to forget that Turkey had already suffered innumerable filchings of territory and saw herself pressed by Greater Serbia, Greater Montenegro, Greater Bulgaria, and Greater Greece. That the war spread beyond the Balkans was not the fault of the Balkan peoples any more than a bonfire is to be blamed if people pull down their houses to add to it. I doubt very much whether the three wretched degenerates who conspired to fire that shot at Serajevo had ever heard of Alsace-Lorraine.

Now, the function of the film is to deal with persons and not things, and therefore we could not expect *Abdul the Damned* to present us with more than the personal anecdote, though it tried very hard, and, I think, successfully, to show that the whole of Turkish history in these years is not to be summed up in a story about Abdul's enslavement to an Austrian comic opera singer. One shot shows us the young Turks under torture, and this is immediately succeeded by another showing the prancing legs of the chorus surrounding the diva in a theatre whose only occupant is the miserable little tyrant. Ludwig of Bavaria insisted,

upon performances at which he was the only spectator, because he was mad ; Abdul insisted upon them because he was sane and on the theory that 100 per cent of the playgoers of his capital were potential assassins. Mr Fritz Kortner gives a magnificent performance of Abdul, whom he presents as a villain so thorough-paced and thorough-going that you end by holding the little man in considerable affection. When he is captured he cannot believe that they are not going to strangle him with his own bowels, which is what he would have done if he had been leader of the young Turks and with a smile almost as long-drawn-out. But after a time the idea dawns upon him that young Turkey has actually imbibed some of the magnanimity of the West, and that they are actually going to allow him to escape with his life and his full complement of eyes, ears, tongue, teeth, and limbs. It takes a considerable time for the old man to believe in this incredible folly, and when in the end he must believe it, there spreads over that eastern countenance a look of deeper contempt than is to be found in the whole western hemisphere. As the Chief of Police, Mr Nils Asther is also very good, and the only incongruous thing in the picture is the Austrian diva, who, to my way of thinking, has about as much sex appeal as a policeman in the Brixton Road. In this picture the actress assumes a thin-lipped allure which happens to freeze me to the marrow. However, there is no accounting for tastes, and it may be that charms which leave me cold are to a sultan the last word in emotional riot.

*Sequoia*, at the Empire, is an exquisite picture so long as the animals are left to themselves, which, alas, they are not. The story is a silly one about a friendship of a puma for a deer, brought about by Miss Jean Parker. It was unlikely that either Miss Parker or the deer would eat the puma, but I hung on hoping that the puma would either eat the deer or Miss Parker. But it did neither, whereby my estimation of pumas in general went down 100 per cent. If it had only devoured this actress's appalling accent it would have been something. Compensation was to be found in the lighting and photography and, I repeat, in the really lovely pictures of the animals before establishing contact with human sentimentality. The author of the film does not seem to realise that a tame puma is as much a contravention of Nature as a ferocious deer.

## 44. "David Copperfield" Filmed

March 16, 1935.

SINCE A QUART cannot by any conceivable ingenuity be got into a pint pot, it follows that after the pouring operation is completed a good deal will be left over. The first question, then, to ask in connection with the film adaptation of *David Copperfield* at the Palace Theatre is whether the essentials have been retained. The next thing to ask is whether the film as a whole is recognisably true to Dickens. The third and last thing is to ask whether any part of it is untrue to Dickens.

I want at this point to get rid of a colossal piece of cant which is a very plague spot of criticism and of the arts to-day. This is the theory that there can be more than one kind of truth about a thing. Over and over again when I have animadverted upon some preposterous piece of acting, people would come up to me and say: "My dear fellow, there's no such thing as a good or a bad Iago. There are only different ways of looking at Iago." This is a monstrous doctrine, and probably the most mischievous piece of broad-mindedness extant in the world to-day. Everybody knows, or ought to know, Phiz's illustrations to *David Copperfield*, and many of us know only too well the wretched illustrations which disfigure so many of the cheap reprints of Dickens. It is manifestly absurd to say that these are merely two different views of Dickens's characters. They are nothing of the kind. One is the original and creative aspect, superb in craftsmanship and drawn by a man who was a first-class reader of Dickens's works. The other illustrations are just bad, of poor drawing, and the work of minds unable to perceive the social distinctions which Dickens indicated so deftly. The point is important because while nearly all the characters in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film are portrayed "after" Phiz, Micawber is played on the lines of the cheaper and poorer illustrations. But more of this later.

Of course, there had to be omissions. Obviously we could not have David being born in a cauldron which means that we do not make acquaintance with the little old lady who did not hold with meandering. There is nothing of the Michaelangelesque waiter, the gentleman who bred

Suffolk punches wholesale, the voiceless Mr Creakle, the lonely Mr Mell, who, even before Browning recommended it, blew out his brains upon his flute. There is nothing of the volatile Miss Mowcher or Mrs Crupp of the nankeen bosom, or even of Hamlet's Aunt. This brings me to the major omissions. You would hardly believe, reader, that in this film, which ran for two and a half hours, room was not, or just could not be, found for Mr Spenlow, Mrs Steerforth, Rosa Dartle, Julia Mills, Traddles, the elder Miss Larkins, or the butcher boy whom David defeated. But all these omissions merely serve to show how rich this book is, and how skilfully the adaptation has been made, since though half the characters are absent, the whole spirit of the book, Micawber always excepted, is conveyed.

In one or two places the verisimilitude is almost uncanny. Peggotty's house is marvellously well reproduced, and so, too, is Betsey Trotwood's little house at Dover. Ever and again throughout the film, the continuity of which is wonderfully preserved, appear one or two little touches showing how much Hollywood and Hollywood's adviser, Mr Hugh Walpole, mistrust to-day's public. Why should Betsey Trotwood be called "Aunt Betsey" except for people who would be stumped to know the relationship if she were not? Why should she call her nephew "David" when we should know that she never called him anything except "Trot" or "Trotwood"? Why are the shillings and pence cut out from Micawber's lecture on finance? And why, oh why, is Mrs Micawber not allowed to draw on those brown gloves without which she would never consent to appear? This character is shamefully under-treated, for it is beautifully acted by Miss Jean Cadell, who is just as exactly right as Mr W. C. Fields's Micawber is exactly wrong. The social distinctions here are of the nicest, and to the discriminating reader are immense fun. Who has ever doubted that Mrs Micawber's social standing was superior to that of her husband? Every one of her remarks is tinged with the melancholy that comes from grandeur departed; one feels that in her family a barouche has rolled. We know that that family—surely the most awful concatenation of human beings outside the cartoons of Michael Angelo—disapproved when young Mr Micawber made his gallant, not to say raffish, proposal: He, too, must be a good deal of the gentleman; he is one of those old boys whose gentility has accrued through aping it, so much so that his prevailing note is condescension.

At his very first appearance in the novel, Micawber is endowed with that "certain indescribable air of doing something genteel," which

throughout the entire book is never to leave him. Consider his first connected speech : "Under the impression that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the Modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road—in short, that you might lose yourself—I shall be happy to call this evening, and install you in the knowledge of the nearest way."

What is wrong with Mr Fields is that he is about as genteel as a pork pie. It is impossible for him to condescend because it is not conceivable that this jovial creature would hold anybody to be beneath him in the social scale. It is impossible that this Micawber would use a word like "peregrination" or know the meaning of "arcana," and throughout the film we are conscious of this difficulty. The high-sounding phrases should roll off the tongue, whereas Mr Fields gives one the impression of having mastered them with difficulty, just as Mr Robey does with Falstaff.

I have no doubt that the success of the film will be due in riotous measure to Mr Fields. But that is because the crowd will go to see, not Dickens's character, but this brilliant and popular buffoon. In fact, I noticed that at the first showing whenever Mr Fields showed signs of opening his mouth, the audience laughed before he had uttered the words which were supposed to be the cause of that laughter. Mr Walpole, who has kept Hollywood from all the grosser forms of error, should really have exerted his authority and insisted upon that conclave in which David and Traddles and Mrs Micawber debate the possibility of a future for Mr Micawber in Banking or Coal.

But really one should not waste space in complaining where there is so much to praise, and my tale of complaints is soon done. I must, however, resent the Dora of Miss Maureen O'Sullivan, who, instead of having the fragile quality of Dresden china, is altogether too heavy in hand. And there my objecting ends. The Murdstones are extremely well done by Mr Basil Rathbone and Miss Violet Kemble-Cooper ; there is a satisfying Dan Peggotty by Mr Lionel Barrymore, a good Mrs Gummidge by Miss Una O'Connor, a very convincing Heep by Mr Roland Young, and an excellent Steerforth by Mr Hugh Williams. Perhaps the best piece of Dickensian acting is Miss Edna May Oliver's Betsey Trotwood, which has that exact wooden appearance, as of an Aunt Sally, with which Phiz has immortalised her. David as a grown-up is agreeably played by Mr Frank Lawton. It is a commonplace of criticism to say that there is no such person as David Copperfield,

and that he is merely the person through whose eyes everybody else is seen. This is true, though it is no reason why the young man should not be personable and gracious, and this, of course, Mr Lawton is. A great deal is made in the film of David as a boy, and this part is played with extraordinary virtuosity by young Master Freddie Bartholomew. If I were asked which in my opinion is the most staggeringly real characterisation of the whole lot I should say the Mr Dick of Mr Lennox Pawle. There is very little distortion in the film except that the shipwreck is given more value than it possesses in the novel. The peculiar triumph of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Company is to have reproduced with fidelity the English scene.

## 45. *An Unpopular View*

March 27, 1935.

"To whom do you, beautifully, belong?" said a character to an English immemorial butler in a play by Henry James, which was put on for, I think, one glossy afternoon at His Majesty's Theatre some quarter of a century ago. If I remember aright the play was called "The High Bid" and was all about an American of some fineness of perception, and an English vulgarian who went stumping about the hall of an English country house fallen into decay, offering to plank down money for it in an aggressive top hat and the kind of frock-coat that won't do. A great English clown once put in his programme a picture of a large English mansion with the legend: "House in which Mr Péliſſier was not born!" And, similarly, Henry James's story about the butler is not the story of *Ruggles of Red Gap*, the new film at the Plaza. Charles Laughton is the English butler hired by an American couple who have all the outrageous simplicity of a pair of knockabouts in an early Mack Sennett comedy. They engage Charles Laughton, who is an earl's valet, to pilot the husband through the difficulties of life in Paris, and I think I must say that the protracted scenes of clowning in the French capital are quite excruciatingly dull. There is even one in which the American and a friend from a neighbouring ranch and Charles Laughton all ~~get drunk~~ together and, entering by one door of a cab, get out at the other, and so round again—a manœuvre which belongs

to the custard-pie throwing epoch of entertainment. The reader will note that in the foregoing sentence I wrote down the name of the film actor instead of the name of the character. This was on purpose, because I wish to draw attention to the increasing craze for preferring the actor to the character. I think it could be shown that Mr George Robey's Falstaff has *essentially* nothing to do with Shakespeare's character, and that Mr W. C. Fields's Micawber *essentially* bears no resemblance to Dickens's character. In each case audiences have been wildly enthusiastic, not over Falstaff and Micawber, but over Robey and Fields. I venture to think that the same thing holds good of Laughton and Ruggles in this film. In my view it is Laughton and not Ruggles who provokes the audience's roars. Largely this is the fault of the story, which I propose to dismiss as one of the worst ever devised, all that part of it in which Ruggles visits America having no relation to an English butler visiting America, and being like nothing on earth except the delirium of a small boy with a sharp attack of influenza and believing himself at the pictures. Indeed, 5 per cent of wilful distortion added to the 95 per cent of the unconscious distortion of this film would have resulted in an enchanting piece of satire at the expense of our most popular art.

But it is time I was getting back to Charles Laughton—I mean, Ruggles. I read with amazement Mr Sydney Carroll's article on this film and this actor and this performance. To be quite fair to Mr Carroll, I read the article twice for fear that, during the first perusal, my mind had been dazed by the most staggering preamble that has ever fallen from critical lips. This is it : "Charles Laughton is the finest actor on the screen to-day. I use the term actor in its correct sense. No one is better qualified to express that opinion than I am." No one was better qualified than Alexander to express regret that there were no more worlds to conquer. No one was better qualified than Nelson on a certain day to express England's views as to the duties expected of her sailors. No one was better qualified than Wellington to express the opinion that his Guards should up and at them. Probably each was aware of his peculiar fitness to express this, that, and the other thing. But there is not, I think, any record of any of them having put the awareness into words. The reader will note that I am not questioning Mr Carroll's facts. I am perfectly certain that he has sufficient mastery of the French, German, Italian, and Russian languages to decide that all the French, German, Italian, and Russian film actors making talkies in those languages are inferior to Mr Laughton. I will even concede that this point may not be a very good one, that Mr Carroll may have written

carelessly and meant no more than that among all living film critics in England, on the Continent, and in America his powers of aesthetic perception and appreciation are not exceeded by anybody. I will make a further concession and agree that possibly Mr Carroll, when he wrote this sentence, had not in view our higher, because younger, intellectuals who babble so unintelligibly and therefore charmingly. Those, that is to say, who lisp to us of Mensendick and how his mechanical metric system is opposed to the organic rhythmic Bode school, and how Eisenstein falls foul of both. I take it that Mr Carroll merely asks us to believe that in the plodding bunch of London's professional film critics he is not to be outdone for percipience and imagination. But, of course, we know and believe this without being told ! I myself am a pretty poor hand at mock modesty. But I admit that the fact that Mr Carroll should make this claim on his own behalf dazed me as though Aldebaran or Betelgeuze had departed from cosmic equilibrium and given my sensitiveness a bump. Recovering, I re-read the article and gathered that Mr Laughton realised "the nature of an English butler, cramped and yet ennobled with servitude, with all the dignity and authority begot of centuries of tradition and family training." I can only say in the smallest voice of which I am capable that if I were the owner of an English mansion, and this Ruggles, with the expression of a Chadband at once oleaginous and hang-dog, were to apply to me for a situation, I should expect him to be the inside member of a gang of crooks arranging to steal my spoons. The point about all our immemorial butlers is that they are more suave and more urbane than their employers, and that their manners sprout from them as naturally as the branches of a tree. Whereas this Ruggles, who so extraordinarily resembles the tittuppy little man in "Waxworks," gives me the impression of being able to butler it convincingly in one house only—that sinister mansion in Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw." The veneer of good intention is there, though to me it is the thinnest of smears, and I can see the brilliantly clever actor in Mr Laughton laying it on. As for the Gettysburg oration about which so much fuss has been made, I have only to say that this doesn't belong either to the story or to the character. Mr Laughton speaks it remarkably well, but no better than in my young days every English actor was expected to speak words of this quality. I give all of the foregoing for what it is worth, and I shall not in the least mind if anybody says it is not worth very much.

The photography ~~and~~ throughout as being extraordinarily poor. That the film is set for no apparent reason in the period of 1905

or whereabouts can be no good reason for giving us photography to match. Have the powers that be been so determined to go the whole hog on this occasion that they have even told their camera men to use cameras belonging to the period under focus ?

## 46. Bergner on the Screen

April 13, 1935.

THERE WAS A FAMOUS TWELVE HOURS on Monday of last week. It began with the Bergner in *Escape Me Never*, the film version of the play at the London Pavilion. In the evening I hied me to the Albert Hall to watch the rubber match between Kid Berg and Gustave Humery. Mr A. P. Herbert, who was of the party, said that, judging from the way in which the French boxer went after our East-end champion, the spectacle should have been called "Kid Bergner in Escape Him Never." Apropos of the magnificent voice of the Master of Ceremonies who was formerly an actor, Mr Seymour Hicks said that when he left the stage to take up his boxing duties, audibility went with him. Everybody complained of that short-sightedness in stage management which allowed the boxers to wear identical trunks. Since both fighters were of the same height, build, and, at a distance, appearance, and since both had dark hair, it was impossible for some time to tell which was which. It is true that Kid Berg had a monogram on his knicker, but you cannot look for knick-knaeks of this sort and at the same time estimate the value of a punch. In boxing it is admittedly more blessed to give than to receive, and in a match it is essential that one should know who at the moment is benefactor and who benefits.

That *Escape Me Never* is a thoroughly British film is proved by the fact that among the technical staff occur names like Andrejiev, Strassner, and Allgeier, the principal actress is the German, Miss Bergner, and the producer is the German, Dr Paul Czinner. The film closely follows the play, which, between you and me and the gate-post, was never more than a bundle of poorly contrived incidents thrown together to show off the qualities of Miss Bergner. Well, what are those qualities ? First, there is a force and downrightness, ~~and sticking-facts-in-the-faceness~~. This is a characteristic German quality ; just as chic is the characteristic

quality of French actresses. These qualities persist in both races in all stages of life. But in the matter of its womanhood the English theatre knows only youth and old age ; there are no plays about middle-aged women. The English counterpart of Miss Bergner is to be found in Meredith's lines :

All the girls are out with their baskets for the primrose ;  
Up lanes, woods through, they troop in joyful bands.  
My sweet leads : she knows not why, but now she loiters,  
Eyes the bent anemones, and hangs her hands.

Stifling the reflection that the English *ingénue* invariably hangs her hands because she doesn't know what to do with them, I have now to suggest that we should be very careful not to confuse what is German in Miss Bergner and therefore common to all good German actresses with her particular genius as a player. I think here that we are approaching the reason why those actresses who are not deemed remarkable in their own country are often a blazing success abroad, the foreign audience confounding the national quality which is strange to it with the supposed rarity of any particular player.

The point we should ask ourselves about Miss Bergner's *Gemma Jones* is, then, not how her portrayal is better than or different from that of an English actress in the part, but in what degree we may suspect it to be better than the performance of any other German actress. It seems to me that, judging from the only performance given in this country by Miss Bergner, she has two outstanding qualities. The first is her boyishness, almost tomboyishness, to which is added an immense capacity for raillery. Here, then, are subtlety and invention, variety and a great deal of real acting ; her methods of starting you into laughter are those of shock troops not of one regiment but of many. Here Miss Bergner is a very fine little actress indeed, though not, I suggest, so outstandingly fine as some of our critics were bombshelled into declaring at first contact with this undeniable talent.

Our critical extravagances of a year ago seemed to me as remarkable as though French critics prostrated by our English *Wendy* had declared Miss Hilda Trevelyan to be the legitimate successor to George, Rachel, Bernhardt. Exquisite though Miss Trevelyan was and is, no serious critic could at any time have made this claim. But, it will be argued, this claim was made for Miss Bergner, not as *comédienne* only, but as tragic actress as well. The answer to this is to watch very closely what in the tragic parts of this film this actress actually does, and to compare

that with what the great tragic actresses of the past have done in their tragic rôles. Note that I use the word "do," and not "look" or "express." From the moment the baby dies in this film Miss Bergner takes on a sorrowful aspect, a little of which is certainly moving. But as this aspect never changes, and is as monotonous as the bottom of a frying-pan, I cannot resist expressing the conviction that it is no more than a sublimation of all that we mean by the word "glum." There is a long walk from the hospital door down the steps in which the actress, turning her full face to the camera, allows you to perceive on that face nothing at all except glumness. The justification, of course, is that Gemma at the moment is dazed. But whoever played Marguerite Gautier, or Germinie Lacerteux, or Olivia might equally well have claimed to express utter poignancy in terms of numb amazement. Yet they did not do so, and I should like to have seen what Bernhardt, or Réjane, or Ellen Terry would have done with that mournful promenade.

Let me make myself plain, even if it means repeating myself, for I do not wish to be misunderstood. It may be that for the purposes of this play and film the means adopted by Miss Bergner are sufficient for their ends. The point is that she does not use enough of them, or use them in sufficient variety, to justify elevation on the strength of this part alone to the rank of a great tragic actress. From the moment the child dies Miss Bergner's acting has only one note and her face one expression, whereas the mark of your great tragic actress is the ability to exploit the whole gamut of grief. So far as I can see, and with apologies to Miss Dorothy Parker, Miss Bergner only exploits it from A. to B. One tribute I am anxious to pay, and this is to the actress's cuteness. Miss Bergner has realised how gammonable as a race the English are, and that whereas "I have no milk" is an insignificant pronouncement, "I haf no meelk!" will be taken by us as the last cry of shattering dolour.

## 47. *Filming the Great Unread*

May 1, 1935.

AT A PARTY some little time ago arose the old question of the master-pieces which everybody promises and nobody seems to have read. Another way of putting this is that if you were to invite a hundred people to

dinner and ask each of them to give the name of a world classic which he has never opened, you would get a highly satisfactory list of the world's hundred best books. When I got home I jotted down a list of a dozen English classics which I had never read, and here it is : " *Gulliver's Travels*," " *Roderick Random*," " *Heart of Midlothian*," " *Emma*," " *Lothair*," " *Wuthering Heights*," " *A Tale of Two Cities*," " *Middlemarch*," " *Beauchamp's Career*," " *Ulysses*," " *The Forsyte Saga*." This looks a monstrous list of omissions, but there are good reasons for some of them. For example, I gave up " *Heart of Midlothian* " for two reasons. First, because of those impossible opening chapters ; to wade through those is like bathing at Southend—you never seem to get to the story or the sea. Second, because of the imposition of " *Old Mortality* " as a holiday task. That cooked Scott's goose for me for ever. The yawning desert entitled " *Romola* " has always seemed to me a good enough, though I am assured a wildly mistaken, reason for not embarking on " *Middlemarch*." The total impossibility of making out who is who in " *Wuthering Heights* " has always defeated me, though I have made five separate attempts. After twenty pages of " *Ulysses* " I had no desire to look before or after. As " *The Forsyte Saga* " is not going to be read in a hundred years, I have decided not to waste time now. About the omissions from Dickens, Thackeray, Meredith, I can plead that I have read pretty nearly everything else of these authors. Disraeli I am keeping for my second childhood ; a friend has told me that his novels have a prevailing atmosphere of screaming Jewish *chicâ*, and transpire entirely in gilded saloons or in the Dolomites ! For my other omissions I can only put forward Johnson's plea when asked by some hard-faced female to explain a mistake in the Dictionary : " Sheer ignorance, ma'am ! " Actually the difficulty is one of time. The man who is a bookworm and nothing else is liable to fall into one or two traps. He is inclined to judge books bookishly and without being able to check their relation to actual life, from which the next step is to regard the written account of a thing as more important than the thing itself. A list of foreign masterpieces which I have never opened would make a still more staggering confession. These include the greater part of the entire Greek Drama, as I have never been able to summon the faintest interest in people like Agamemnon or any of his trollops. The man of whom it is prophesied that he will kill his father and marry his mother, and who immediately and of his own free will slays and weds two people old enough to be both, is a blank fool, and I don't need blank verse, or whatever was the Greek equivalent, to tell me this. Lest the eagle and

editorial eye of a certain unillustrated paper should be offended by this statement, let me say that the complete knowledge of the reasons why Clytemnestra pulled out Electra's hair by the handful and was bitten in the neck by Cassandra would not have modified my views upon "Charley's Aunt." It would be an exaggeration to describe my acquaintance with Homer as even nodding. As for Dante, I was once successfully put off him by hearing some Frenchman say : " Quel raseur ! " The mighty Russian masterpieces like " War and Peace " I am keeping for the next world conflagration ; the last one wasn't long enough.

This brings me to the point immediately concerning this article, which is that never until this afternoon, when I saw the new film at the Tivoli, had I the vaguest notion of what Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* were miserable about. I am therefore totally unable to tell readers of this page whether the film is to be considered in the light of a version or a travesty. I only know that it is a magnificent entertainment and, considered as pure film, grandly done. It is obvious from the start that the novel must be a colossal one with a philosophic background or framework sufficiently big to hold the incidents of a tremendous story. I cannot believe that the simple phrase : " The meaning of life is to give and not to receive," is not expanded into a full-dress thesis. Or that somewhere in the book, always provided it is not all over the book, there is not some noble essay on the pity mankind owes to those who are without home. Hugo, like Balzac, shows himself to be the master of the stupendous phrase when he makes the simple fellow who is arrested in mistake for Valjean, say : " Not every man can have a house to be born in. When I was young they called me Little Man ; now I am old they call me Old Man ! " Yes, I feel it in my bones that this book must be a great plea for those who wander over the face of the earth without name or home !

The high-lights in the film of *Les Misérables* are first the pursuit of Valjean in the carriage by the police on horseback, which is our old friend of the Wild West film all over again, but very well done in a very creditable gloaming. The second thing I most readily remember is the riots, which are done in most admired disorder. The third is the long traipse through the sewers, a masterpiece of photography and setting. I suppose I need not be ecstatic about the latter, as moralists have told us that in the matter of sewers anywhere in Hollywood will do. I admit I couldn't help wondering ~~why~~ this sewer, which began in the street, should end in Valjean's apartment. And why, oh why, having

waded through filth up to the neck, should Valjean appear in the door of his home, still carrying Marius, without a drop of moisture visible on either of them? Also, I do not believe that the little ladies of the period discarded the natural eyebrow in favour of its pencilled sister. Otherwise, the film seemed to me to be faultless. Now, how is it acted? Beautifully by Sir Cedric Hardwicke as the bishop. Though I have never seen a seraph, I am persuaded that Sir Cedric looks like one in this part. Very well by Mr Fredric March, whose Valjean would be even better if, somehow or other, one didn't think that a Barrymore would have made it even more impressive. But it is a huge part which would easily take both the Barrymores, with Ethel thrown in, and, considering that he is single-handed, Mr March does well enough. Anyhow, he is very far from being overwhelmed by Mr Laughton's Javert, which is a superb piece of acting in the kind of rôle that this actor was born to play. Whether he likes it or not, our Charles is a master of the sardonic, and his detective is a truly terrifying creation. The young women succeed in being inoffensive, which is saying a great deal. Fortunately, they don't have much to do or many words to speak.

## 48. *Holmes and Watson*

May 22, 1935.

ONE OF THE GLORIOUSEST PIECES of funning which have ever presented themselves to the human mind is the piecing together of the lives of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson as revealed in the writings of their creator and on the supposition that he was nowhere careless or haphazard or subject to error. These investigations, for there are many of them, are no more absurd than the pedantries of German Shakespearian commentators or Baconian theorists, and they are infinitely more amusing. Where, for example, were the friends born? The case of Dr. Watson is comparatively simple. It cannot have been London, argues Mr S. C. Roberts, since Watson refers to that city as "that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained," and "it is difficult to believe that Watson, in whose veins there flowed a current of honest sentiment, could thus have described his native city." In the view of this authority Watson must

definitely be put down as a Hampshire man. The matter of Holmes's birth-place presents a real difficulty, and even that great Holnesian authority, Father Ronald Knox, will not commit himself beyond the statement that Holmes's boyhood was passed in the country. He deduces this from the fact, revealed in "The Greek Interpreter," that Sherlock came from a family of squires, and that his brother Mycroft, Londoner though he was in his habits, was an accomplished driver of broughams. The fact that Mycroft did actually drive a brougham is culled from the Final Problem, and it was his skill, remembered and recaptured from his early days, which enabled him to dash away from the midst of the traffic outside Victoria Station.

Then there comes the question of Holmes's university. Here the greatest authority is Miss Dorothy Sayers. This omniscient and acumenous lady points out that the two pieces of evidence as to Holmes's college career occur in "The 'Gloria Scott'" and "The Musgrave Ritual" respectively. In "The 'Gloria Scott'" passage Holmes says: "Victor Trevor was the only friend I made during the two years I was at college. . . . Trevor was the only man I knew, and that only through the accident of his bull-terrier freezing on to my ankle one morning as I went down to Chapel." This obviously fixes the university as Cambridge, and for the following reasons: At Oxford no dog, bull-terrier or otherwise, would have been allowed inside the college gates, from which it follows that if Oxford is the university, Holmes, living "out" at the time, was bitten in the town. This brings up the further and insuperable difficulty that Oxford freshmen are immediately allotted rooms in college, and only move into lodgings in their third year of residence. On the point as to whether Trevor belonged to the same college as Holmes, Miss Sayers has the acute observation that "if so, he must have been cutting Chapel on the morning of his fateful meeting with Holmes, since the bulldog could not have formed part of the congregation." But will not Miss Sayers agree that whether Trevor was or was not cutting Chapel is as immaterial as the line at Victoria Station in whose cloakroom in the Wilde play Mr Thomas Cardew found the hand-bag containing the infant John Worthing? The point is not the Chapel-cutting, but the university. This would now definitely seem to be Cambridge, where the freshman is allowed to lodge out, if it were not for the passage in "The Musgrave Ritual" in which Holmes, talking in his own person, has the words "during my last years at the university." From this we must conclude that he spent more than two years there. Holmes, then, could have been bitten by the bull-terrier

during a third or fourth year at Oxford. Wilde's dictum that of two evils it is safer to believe the worse does not hold when it comes to questions of literary error. Holmes cannot have alluded both to "the two years" and "my last years," which means that Watson must have either misheard or transcribed wrongly, and I suggest that, whereas it is easy to confuse "years" with "year," to mistake the words "three or four" for "two," points to much grosser carelessness. Plumping, then, for the lesser mistake on Watson's part, we are driven to the conclusion that Cambridge must have been the university. I have laboured the point because it is fair to give Miss Sayers an opportunity of clearing up a difficulty of her own creating. Miss Sayers has written: "At Oxford, therefore, the biting of Holmes while on his way to Chapel through the streets of the town could not possibly have occurred before his third year—unless, indeed, we are to suppose that Holmes was so piously minded as to attend voluntary evening chapels, which, from his habits of mind and thought, appears unlikely." Why evening chapels, since in "The 'Gloria Scott'" passage Holmes definitely says that the bull-terrier froze on to his ankle *one morning*? As it is inconceivable that Miss Sayers can make such a slip, I can only assume that she holds one of two theories. The first is that Watson was so stupid as to confuse night with day. The second is that Holmes merely said "Chapel," and that Watson, expanding his rough notes, slipped in the word "morning"!

I have no space to deal with the engaging problem of Watson's second marriage, and can only allude to two little-pursued but, nevertheless, entralling sides to this amazing subject. Which of the great detective's undivulged cases does the reader most regret? These include the Adventure of the Tired Captain, the Case of Wilson the Notorious Canary Trainer, and the Incredible Mystery of Mr James Phillimore. I plump for Mr Phillimore, who, stepping back into his house to get his umbrella, was never more seen in this world. Then there is the list of Holmes's writings. I cannot decide whether I most want to possess that monograph On the Polyphonic Motets of Lassus ("The Bruce-Partington Plans"), the Study of Chaldean Roots in the Ancient Cornish Language ("The Devil's Foot"), or the Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen ("His Last Bow"). Perhaps the Bee has it.

*The Triumph of Sherlock Holmes*, the new film at the Capitol, is taken from "The Valley of Fear," and is very well done. Mr. Arthur Wontner is the best film ~~or stage~~ Holmes I have ever seen; indeed, he is the only one in whom I have ever begun to believe. But I cannot

accept the Watson of Mr Ian Fleming. Watson, though a bit of a lady-killer, was not mercurial, and his gallantries should be formal and stodgy. In my view, Watson should always be made up to look like the author of the stories. Mr Leslie Perrins and Miss Jane Carr do very well as the American Detective and his wife, and I have never seen two such terrifying villains as Messrs Roy Emerton and Ben Welden contrive to be. But it bothered me, and I think it would bother Mr Roberts, Father Knox, and Miss Sayers, to determine why any Sherlock Holmes story should be prefaced by the opening bars of "Tristan and Isolda" !

## 49. *Dawn of Garbo*

*June 19, 1935.*

IT IS AN ENORMOUS ADVANTAGE when theatre and film critics are authorities on something else besides plays and films. Though I place complete confidence in the judgments of Mr Baughan, I should like to feel that he was also expert in aeronautics and water-polo. I could wish that Mr Sydney Carroll had been a fly-weight boxing champion or ridden Derby winners. There was a time when Mr Ivor Brown was not the golfer he is to-day, and I defy anybody to say that his judgment is less sound now that he can drive, approach, and putt with the tigers. My own particular hobby is harness ponies, and the reason I fell in love with them many years ago is that they affected me exactly in the way I am always affected by a great actor or actress. Once in a sporting paper I happened on a definition which all the thinking I have done since has not been able to better. The writer was describing a Welsh pony : "A veritable Ganymede in form, Shooting Star has action which, when seen, makes life easier for the man who loves fine horses and fine action." Makes life easier ; there's the whole secret ! The action of one little pony made life easier for this penny-a-liner, made him for the rapturous moment indifferent to ill-health, bankruptcy, the world's peace, even. It is the business of great actors to make life easier. There is an old saying which describes people as being above themselves. The business of great acting is to raise the spectator above himself, to intoxicate him, so that he is no longer himself, but is ~~raised to~~ a power of appreciation undreamed of in his sober senses. In this way the ecstasy which is in

the artist speaks to the ecstasy which is in all of us, just as it was the ecstasy in *Shooting Star* which spoke to the ecstasy in the lover of Welsh ponies.

The reader may say that the foregoing is all very well, that it is only phrase-making, and that actors are no more related to ponies than they are to prize pigs or prize-fighters. For, such a reader will argue, is not the lover of pigs and pugs equally taken out of himself and raised to ecstasy by their respective points and punches? That is where that convenient Aunt Sally, the illogical yet argumentative reader, fulfils his or her function so admirably. There is an enormous connection between the young of the horse and the young player. The characteristic of the foal is, as all the world knows, *legginess*, which is still apparent in the yearling and should not have entirely disappeared in the two-year-old. Up to the age of two a harness horse should be all wings and arms and legs with its action all over the place and not in any way set or made up. Whatever it does should be more or less right, but it should not be doing all the right things at the same time, for if it does it is using up on assemblage and concentration that vitality which it ought to be giving to pure growth. So it is with a player. One expects the young actress to do a lot of right things and almost as many wrong ones, and if in her teens she has in any way tightened up, then we may be fairly certain that she is not going to be a great actress. Pretty, self-contained little girls rarely grow up into beautiful women; it is the gawky creature, all arms and legs and with a mouth which does not know which side of the nose it wants to live on, who ultimately becomes an Ellen Terry. I have not read what any of my colleagues have said about the film, *Joyless Street*, which is on view at the Empire, and in which Greta Garbo appeared at the age of seventeen. But I doubt whether the rashest of them would dare to say that on the strength of this picture he would have hailed Garbo as a great film actress in the days when memories of Francesca Bertini still lingered. The programme admits that Garbo at seventeen had not "the wonderful poise and repose which are now such features of her acting," and the programme is right to make that admission. For whoever wrote this note has exactly seized the point, which is that if Garbo had possessed those qualities at that age she would not be the actress she is to-day. Yet no critic who has eyes in his head and a feeling for quality in acting could have failed to recognise that here was something which might grow into great film acting. Here were extraordinary looks and a face which, lacking the putty-like, dimpled prettiness of your normal film star, resembled a

portrait roughly limned with only the eyes finished. It is difficult to say whether at this age this young woman's looks are going to turn to beauty or miss it and achieve something gaunt and hard. There is no doubt that she can act, if by acting is meant the power to suggest that she is feeling emotion and giving it out again in terms of her own personality. Garbo has always had this power of living and feeling in front of the camera, and living and feeling any particular scene for the first time. Whereas, of course, most film actresses are content to do the living in front of the camera and leave the photographer to do the feeling for them, not once but a hundred times. In *Joyless Street* Garbo is all that a film star in the making should be. Just as it is only her eyes that are finished, so her acting is only first-class in the emotional passages. She is gawky as well as glamorous, does not know how to walk, and has not acquired enough sense to tell her director to hide her plain legs and large feet. Of course, if the director had realised to the full the treasure he had got hold of he would not have needed telling in these matters. But even in those days Garbo had that indefinable something which draws your eyes to one unbroken filly in a field and keeps you from looking at all the others. What I suppose I am trying to say is that to the critical eye the hardly begun symphony of Garbo's acting is more worth while than any other score complete to its last double bar.

After an hour of this rapturous silence one was forced to come back to the imbecile churning of the modern American talkie. This example was called *Times Square Lady*, and its heroine at one moment leaned her cheek against a cow and sang a duet with the crooner who was milking it. At another time she was the centre of a gang of thugs, of whom she outwitted eleven while reforming and marrying the twelfth. Since this kind of film depends wholly on its technical adroitness, let me ask why a motor car doing presumably fifty miles an hour continues to jog up and down on the same patch of road while the trees on each side of it fail to recede? Can it be that the photographer is astride the bonnet of a stationary car moved up and down by somebody underneath, like the waves of an old-fashioned theatrical storm scene? Miss Virginia Bruce is a very pretty new-comer with a tendency to be a very pretty little actress as well. But neither she nor any other of to-day's film stars possesses the one thing of which Garbo showed signs at her first appearance. This thing is more than beauty; it is strangeness in beauty.

## 50. *To Film or Not to Film*

October 19, 1935.

I HAVE BEEN PRIVILEGED to see a throw-away, which I understand is being distributed in thousands. In it Professor G. B. Harrison delivers himself of some nonsense which is both voluminous and acute. He begins as follows :

There is a world of difference between a stage play and a film. On the stage, the author, who provides the actors with their words, is the most important partner in the production, for the greater part of the effect of a play comes from things heard ; the ears are so much more important than the eyes that many plays, especially when the dialogue is good, can be reproduced for the ears alone in the form of radio plays.

Do I understand the Professor to mean that there can be a reasonable performance through the radio of a play like "Macbeth" ? If so, I totally disagree. Begging Mr Val Gielgud's pardon and that of everybody else at Broadcasting House, there is no such thing as a radio play. All we hear is a viewless recitation in which the actors are in audible distress about something which is obviously of no importance whatever. But I must be careful not to be led astray by my own red herring. The Professor continues :

On the screen, the eyes are far more important. Actually, although most film-goers probably do not realise it, the proportion of dialogue to action is very small, and although the music is now part of the film itself and not supplied separately by an orchestra, in the best films the spoken word is sparingly used.

Art thou there, Truepenny ? The best plays in the world's literature are Shakespeare's, and in them the spoken word is exploited with a superbity, an exquisiteness, a satisfying-all-needsness (as the Germans would say) unattained elsewhere. Surely it is obvious from the foregoing that the best films must be the last and worst medium in which to reproduce the best plays, as anybody except a Professor could, of course, see.

Our friend goes on to say that anyone who undertakes to produce a

film version of any Shakespearian play is faced with all kinds of problems. Agreed. Then follows the sentence :

If he were simply to film the stage version of the play as a whole, he would produce a result which is neither good drama nor good film.

Here the Professor's logic is so childish that it is difficult not to deem it disingenuous. How do we know that a film which merely photographed, say, Edmund Kean in "The Merchant of Venice" or Irving and Ellen Terry in "Hamlet," would not be good drama? How, until we see it, do we know that it would not be good film? You cannot argue that a good film of "Hamlet" *must* include the adventure with the pirates, the march of Fortinbras's army, and Ophelia coming up three times to breathe, and then say that a film which didn't would be a bad one. Reduce this to simpler terms. You cannot lay down any proposition beginning with the words : "Since a severe filming of Shakespeare will not do, it follows that . . ." The falsity is in the words "will not do." How do we know it won't? The thing has never been tried.

The Professor tries to cover himself by saying :

Shakespeare himself wrote for a stage which was very limited in its equipment, and provided with little, if any, scenery. He had to gain most of his effect by means of his poetry and dialogue. A talking picture which was mainly dialogue would be deadly dull.

I challenge this in two ways. Are such films as *Trouble in Paradise* and *The Guardsman* dull? And is Shakespeare less worth listening to than the authors of those scripts? Then again, deadly dull to whom? To nitwits, or to an audience, say, of the Old Vic calibre? Lastly, Professor Harrison asks us to answer three questions : How can Reinhardt transmute the stage drama of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" into film drama? The answer is that he transmutes it altogether, that is to say out of existence, in the way that Hamlet would reform bad acting out of existence. Secondly, he asks how Reinhardt creates the atmosphere which Shakespeare evolves by poetry alone? The answer is that he doesn't. Thirdly, he asks what impression the film leaves as a work of art in itself? The answer is : A bad one! With one or two exceptions it is as though Professor Reinhardt had taken Whipsnade for a week and let loose a company of actors good enough for films about American college life. I heartily agree with Mr Cedric Belfrage, who wrote : "Dick Powell and Ross Alexander as Lysander and Demetrius

are any pair of American collegiates wrangling over the co-eds. Jean Muir<sup>and</sup> Olivia de Havilland are the co-eds."

Professor Harrison goes on to single out the things which in this film will abide—such things as "the great song of welcome to Theseus," which is like something out of "Tannhäuser," performed in Regent's Park in a high wind, "the dancing of Miss Nini Theilade," which might be a projection of the afternoon dreaming of Mallarmé's faun, and the "grotesque dwarfs of Fairyland," which might be any Christmas pantomime. Not one single word in the whole of the Professor's article about the almost total disappearance of that heavenly poetry which is Shakespeare's play! The whole truth is that Reinhardt just cannot stand up to Shakespeare, and that, were they given, such lines as Titania's :

The honey-bags steal from the humble-bees,  
And for night-tapers crop their waxen thighs,  
And light them at the fiery glow-worm's eyes,  
To have my love to bed and to arise ;  
And pluck the wings from painted butterflies,  
To fan the moonbeams from his sleeping eyes :  
Nod to him, elves, and do him courtesies. . . .

would expose all his would-be glamour for what it really is—the tawdry tinsel of overgrown Christmas pantomime.

I cull from the very same page a passage from the Shakespeare, printing in italics the lines which the film omits :

BOTTOM : I shall desire you of more acquaintance, good Master Cobweb : if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you. Your name, honest gentleman ?

PEASEBLOSSOM : Peaseblossom.

BOTTOM : I pray you, command me to Mistress Squash, your mother, and to Master Peascod, your father. Good Master Peaseblossom, I shall desire you of more acquaintance, too. Your name, I beseech you, sir ?

MUSTARDSEED : Mustardseed.

BOTTOM : Good Master Mustardseed, I know your patience well : that same cowardly, giant-like ox-beef hath devoured many a gentleman of your house : I promise you your kindred hath made my eyes water ere now. I desire your more acquaintance, good Master Mustardseed.

There is, you see, no Shakespeare left, and instead we have to put up with hour after hour of plump chorus-girl gambolling, a Titania who looks like a pantomime Fairy Queen, and an Oberon who is the very spit of pantomime's Demon King.

But the Adelphi film is not without its good points. There is magnificence. Theseus and his Queen are attended with extravagant pomp; the barge they sit in is of more than burnished gold. Dr Korngold has been loyal to Mendelssohn's music. And last I have nothing but praise for the Bully Bottom of James Cagney and the Puck of Mickey Rooney. That Bottom should seem surprisingly young may be due to the fact that in England the part is always given to the leading Shakespearian comedian, who is generally over fifty. Puck on this occasion has nothing to do with Shakespeare, and in liking this performance what I really mean is that Master Rooney is a brilliant actor in his own right. Incredible as a fairy, he is the one credible piece of humanity in the play—an utterly delightful and very naughty, naked little boy.

## 51. *The Truth About Film Acting*

October 23, 1935.

PUDOVKIN'S "FILM ACTING," which has just been admirably translated by the Hon. Ivor Montagu, is that odd phenomenon, the high-brow thing that is not daft. At the same time, I am not at all sure that Pudovkin's arguments do not liberally contradict themselves. Let me also warn the reader that what follows is intensely serious and that flippancies will be resumed next week.

Does this book utterly debunk film acting, or doesn't it? Every reader must have seen and wondered at the amazing performances of certain children, and every reader, if he is logical, must, in view of certain magnificent grown-up exhibitions, have asked himself whether the world is not at the present moment inconceivably richer in great players than it has ever been. At this point the sceptic in one asks why these things should be. What is it which has led to this extraordinary increase in one particular branch of human genius, for which there is nothing to account? Now a logician confronted with something for which there is no explanation invariably follows one method. He asks himself whether that thing, which neither he nor anybody else can explain, does, in fact, exist. This book goes a long way towards supplying the answer, and I am not at all sure that it is the answer which Pudovkin

wants us to find. Can it be that these new actors in whom the world has suddenly become so rich are not actors at all?

Consider this passage—I had almost written the word “confession” :

In *The Story of a Simple Case* there was a scene as follows : a father and his small son, a Pioneer, who have not seen each other for a long time, meet. It is early morning. The boy is just out of bed. He is stretching and flexing his muscles after sleep. At his father’s question, “How’s life, Johnny?”, he turns towards him, and instead of an answer gives him a sweet, rather shy smile. . . .

I planned as follows : I decided, first and foremost, to make the boy experience a real pleasure from the process of stretching, more, even, feel a need for it. To achieve this I bade him bend forward, grip his feet with his hands, and hold them in this position until I gave him permission to straighten up. . . .

The boy was really interested ; I felt it. Now I further reckoned thus : when I give him permission to straighten out, and he stretches with genuine pleasure, I shall interrupt his movement with a question : “Well, Johnny, isn’t it grand to stretch?” Talking during the shot was not allowed ; the boy knew he had to keep silent. I knew his nature well, and I was convinced that he would answer me with precisely the smile I needed, acquiescent, and a little confused and shy at the unusualness of the situation. Rehearsals would have been useless ; I was all out for the spontaneity of the reaction I had foreseen might come.

The scene began. The boy stood bent downwards. I allowed him to straighten out—he stretched ; I saw on his face a satisfaction both of physical pleasure and from his feeling that the game I had suggested to him was going without a hitch. I put my question and received in reply the beautiful and sincere smile I wanted.

*If that isn’t a complete give-away, what is?* But Pudovkin does not see this !

I now come to the essence of the book contained in a chapter headed : “Theoretical Postulates of Discontinuity!” (By my troth, captain, these are bitter words!—as Mistress Quickly remarked.) Here Pudovkin explains—and the cat is finally out of the bag :

The actor must be able to act separate bits separated from one another by any time interval, and trust their combination entirely and solely to the director, the only person guided by fore-perception of the film in its already completed state.

Happy thought! Why does not Pudovkin go into partnership with Mr Gordon Craig? Our Russian friend then asks us to imagine “an actor delivering an emotional speech in a large auditorium. The listening crowd reacts to the words of the orator. It applauds, it interrupts with isolated calls and shouts.” Could there be a better description of

Mark Antony's speech? Pudovkin's argument is that Mark Antony must be prepared to say: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!" on Monday morning and "If you have tears, prepare to shed them now!" on Wednesday afternoon, the intervening time being spent in photographing the reactions of the crowd and the eloquence latent in the chief actor's left eyebrow. Does the reader think I exaggerate? Hear Pudovkin:

Realise what tremendous importance in the construction of the whole image of man in action, have his gestures and his pantomime connected with his utterances . . .

The culmination of the impression effected by an uttered word or sentence depends upon a movement of the hand; again, the closing of the eyes may add an unexpected touch of pathos to another word or phrase. . . .

At one moment we see the face of the orator with eyes tight shut. At another his whole body straining with arms held high. For an instant we catch his glance directed straight at us. A nervous movement of his hand behind his back may also serve as a definite and colourful characterisation of some moment.

In other words, at ten o'clock on Tuesday Mark Antony will have a number of shots taken of himself with his eyes tight shut, from twelve to one he will spend straining his body with arms held high, while the afternoon will be occupied with nervous movements of his hand. And on the following day he will go on with his oration where he left off the day but one before! Pudovkin sees that the natural desire of the actor is "to dwell in his acting image as wholly and uninterruptedly as possible"—in other words, *to act!* And the whole point of this book is to ask whether this desire should be sacrificed to monkeyings with the camera. By the way, I should be obliged to the Hon. Ivor Montagu if for Pudovkin's benefit he will find the exact Russian equivalent for "monkeyings"!

This is the place to say that the author's main argument is wildly disingenuous. We all know that in the third act of "Julius Caesar" Antony has four great speeches. We all know that between these great speeches there is a pause while somebody else says something or the scenery is changed. Pudovkin describes this as "split life," whereby the actor "must stand in the wings waiting for the moment when the development of the play's action will once more drag him front stage." Then follows this: "I repeat that this 'split life,' this discontinuous animation, of the stage actor does not differ organically from the 'separate-shot acting' of the film actor, in the course of the shooting of a film."

I regard that as not only rubbish, but intellectually dishonest rubbish ! I have left to the last the one thing which completely gives away the whole theory of film acting. The book contains a number of illustrations of professional actors and non-professionals bagged for the purposes of a particular film. *How is it, if film acting is an art, that in every case the non-professional has the professional actor beaten hollow ?*

## 52. *Hurrah for the "Bounty"*

January 8, 1936.

HERE IS A GRAND and very nearly perfect film ; so grand that one glaring imperfection remains unnoticed. The history of "The Mutiny of the 'Bounty'" should be part of every Englishman's heritage, but one may safely presume that it is not, whence it follows that discrepancy has no trouble in "getting away with it." The film begins with that picture of quiet domesticity which, in the celluloid world, is always the prelude to scenes of bloodshed. To this must be attributed those early shots of the midshipman in his ancestral home, and the decent young fellow of humble circumstances upon whom the press-gang is to pounce. But once these shots are safely over, the film begins in good earnest. Probably the story is plainer sailing to anybody who is not drenched with the subject as I have long been. Amongst my earliest reading was the first and best book on the subject, and I rather regret that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer did not content themselves with the authentic history but preferred to base their film on a recent novel on the subject. However, the film version does magnificently by the notorious villain of the piece—Captain Bligh—who is shown to be not so much a simple sadist as a great seaman with the soul of a sadist. Both the gross and the fine of the part are superbly conveyed by Mr Laughton, who is by no means the uncomplicated, Beery-like type of scoundrel, but a super-subtle, almost Shakespearian scoundrel with a high intellectual pride in his own scoundrelism. Mr Laughton never forgets the great seaman, and there is a world of difference between the perfumctoriness of his prayers on Sunday morning at the ship's service and his appeal to the Almighty when he is cast into the boat. This Bligh is an immoral brute full of moral courage, and his words to

Fletcher Christian on being put over the side, " You are taking my ship from me, sir," show the outraged sensibility of an officer in the King's Navy.

It is here that the film goes wrong for the first time. One snatch of dialogue has come down to us. This is something that was said by Christian as he put Bligh overboard : " That—Captain Bligh—that is the thing—I am in hell !—I am in hell !" Mr Clark Gable could not say this because he has not been allowed to draw the real Christian. Christian has to be this film's hero, and Mr Clark Gable makes a figure of him rather more heroic than I imagine Christian to have actually been. As I read history he was of a slower nature than Clark Gable's, and even when stirred to mutiny still mutinied against his conscience. However, one must not take too brain-sickly a view of what first and foremost is a film, and does not pretend to be more. As a screen epic and picture of life at sea towards the close of the eighteenth century it is superb and worthy of any adulatory adjective in the film-goer's repertory. The scenes on board ship have the very tang, bite, and almost smell of life as one imagines that it was then led at sea, and I cannot imagine two hours of grander entertainment. My only criticism of this part of the film would be that the scenes on Otaheite are all a little too like Mr Cochran's orgy in " Helen !" Also that in rowing out to meet the arriving " Bounty " the natives display a unanimity and a precision which never was on Polynesian sea or land and has only been witnessed in the corresponding scenes in *Sanders of the River*.

The next departure from truth occurs with the arrival of the " Pandora," which, in this version, is commanded by Captain Bligh, though actually the officer sent in pursuit of the mutineers left on Otaheite was a still greater brute by the name of Captain Edwards. And here occurs something which, from the point of view of the present film, is a grave omission, though whether it may make part of the intended sequel one does not as yet know. In the film which we have got we see part of the tremendous voyage of 3600 miles made by Bligh and his men. But we also see the wrecking of the " Pandora," and Edwards with his prisoners taking refuge in the boats. Now how do the visitors to this film imagine that Captain Edwards got home ? It has, I suggest, artfully been concealed from them that Edwards accomplished another open-boat voyage nearly as long and quite as perilous as that achieved by Bligh.

The present film ends rather summarily—though it lasts for a full two and a quarter hours—with the court-martial of the mutineers, or

rather of some of them. For this is a very complicated story, since in addition to the two boats, "Bounty" and "Pandora," there were two lots of mutineers. The mutineers captured by Edwards were only those who remained at Otaheite after Christian, heading a party of nine, had made for Pitcairn Island. About these the film tells us nothing, though their tale is the most exciting and romantic part of the whole business. Fletcher Christian and his eight men took with them nine Otaheite wives and seven Otaheite men to act as their servants. After a time the natives became jealous of the white sailors and murdered them all except one—John Adams. Whereupon the Otaheite widows rose up, drugged the Otaheite men and murdered the lot, with the result that John Adams became husband to the entire female population. And there the story ends, all but the epilogue. Twenty-five years later Sir Thomas Staines, cruising in the "Briton" between the Marquesas and Valparaiso, encountered an uncharted island some five miles long. He was hailed from the shore in English by an extremely handsome, naked, red-brown savage. Thursday October Christian, for so he was called, was the son of Fletcher Christian, and had been taken under the protection of Adams, now a venerable old man. Invited on board, the young savage was set down to meat, and, to the general astonishment, prefaced his meal by saying grace !

And now comes an even later epilogue in which I play a tiny part. Many years ago I had rooms in Doughty Street beneath those of a first mate in the Merchant Service who, on the eve of one of his voyages, told me that his ship was due to call at Pitcairn Island. Would I like to make the inhabitants a little present ? I said I would, my contribution being one consignment of castor oil and another of port. A year later the mate returned with a present of three oranges and a friendly letter from a young native signed "October Christian." Can it be wondered that I have a singular affection for the subject of this film ? But affection is not critical, and I have pleasure in giving my testimony that as a piece of sustained story-telling, film acting, and camera work it is, in my view, a very fine achievement indeed. I cannot remember a picture by which I have been more greatly thrilled.

## 53. *The "Bounty" Again*

January 15, 1936.

I MAKE NO APOLOGY for returning to the film so improperly entitled *"Mutiny on the "Bounty."*" The correct title of the original account—never mind anybody's novel—is "The Mutiny and Piratical Seizure of H.M.S. 'Bounty.'" Whence, of course, the title should be the same as that of Sir John Barrow's book, "The Mutiny of the 'Bounty.'" This film has made an enormous appeal to the public, and quite rightly, for it is magnificent. It is undoubtedly as good a film as the public will stand, which does not prevent me from reflecting how very much better it would have been if the makers of it had been content to stick to the facts, which, as usual, are so much better than the fiction built upon them. The film at the Empire makes great play with one Midshipman Byam, brilliantly acted by Mr Franchot Tone. Like Rosa Dartle, I want to know why this character should have been invented in place of Midshipman Peter Heywood, who did exist and upon whom hangs one of the most human stories in connection with this great tale. On board the "Bounty" there were five midshipmen called Thomas Hayward, John Hallet, Peter Heywood, Edward Young, and George Stewart. Hayward exists in the film as a figure of fun, and he and Hallet were put in the boat with Bligh. The other three midshipmen remained on the "Bounty." Note that nobody who actually sailed in the "Bounty" bore the name of Byam.

Now, I should not in the least object if Byam's story were better than Heywood's. But it isn't. Indeed, the account of the steps which led to Byam's pardon is in every way inferior to the known facts appertaining to the real Peter Heywood. Nessy Heywood was an echo, and a not very distant one, of Scott's Jeanie Deans. Nessy was an accomplished young woman living in the Isle of Man, and it was entirely owing to her efforts that Heywood, having been sentenced to death, was pardoned. Jeanie, we know, walked from Edinburgh to London, whereas Nessy was a young lady of means and of a literary turn of mind. Nevertheless, she made a sufficiently arduous journey. A charmingly naïve account which has been preserved tells us that "on Monday, while at breakfast, she was informed that a small fishing vessel would

"I from Douglas to Liverpool in half an hour, and she promptly embarked." Then follows her own account: "We did not arrive till after a most tempestuous passage of forty-nine hours, with the wind directly contrary the whole way. At the mouth of the river we got a small open fishing boat, into which I got, and was told I should by that means arrive two hours sooner than I should otherwise have done; and, as the sea was very high, every wave washed over me, and I had a complete wetting." Arrived in London, Nessy addressed "observations" to the Earl of Chatham, First Lord of the Admiralty, and brother of the Great Commoner. For some reason or other Bligh cherished an intense hatred for Heywood, to whose mother he wrote: "I received our letter this day, and feel for you very much, being perfectly sensible of the extreme distress you must suffer from the conduct of your son Peter. His baseness is beyond all description." On the same day he wrote to the lad's uncle: "It will give me much pleasure to hear that his friends can bear the loss of him without much concern." Nor does anything that we see of Byam in the film compete in interest with what is known of Heywood. It is set down that "the ex-Deemster's son, dressed in the 'country manner' and tanned and tattooed from head to foot—for Peter Heywood says that he tattooed himself lavishly in order to gain the Otaheitans' friendship and esteem, and that he was a universal favourite among them—marched to war with natives against natives, and afterwards swallowed his disgust as best he could, witnessing the ceremony of presenting the eyes of the sacrificed foemen to the god." It is no use telling me that there was no room in the film for a more realistic portrait of this young midshipman, who seems to have regarded his sojourn among the Otaheitans as a kind of Three Arts Ball, and obviously the whole affair of sister Nessy is first-rate film material. And consider the sequel. To quote Sir John Barrow: "This impassioned and most affectionate of sisters, with an excess of sensibility, which acted too powerfully on her bodily frame, sunk, as is so often the case with such susceptible minds, on the first attack of consumption. She died within the year of her brother's liberation."

Everybody must hope that the film is going to have a sequel, though I am afraid the first part of it has already queered the pitch of the second. It was really monstrous to send Bligh out in charge of the "Pandora," and to suppress Captain Edwards, a tyrant in magnificent contrast with Bligh. For whereas Bligh was a thinking and deliberate sadist, Edwards was an unreflective monster in the guise of a human being. If Mr Laughton should read these words, let me tell him that

he need not have feared the competition even of a George Bancroft in the part, and that I should have thought still more of him if he had boldly said to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: "No Edwards, no Bligh!" It is probably too late to repair this, but it is not too late to insist upon a full account of what happened to Fletcher Christian and the eight mutineers who sailed away on the "Bounty" to Pitcairn Island. Criticism should always be constructive, and I therefore recommend to the makers of the sequel pages 321-322 in the World's Classics edition of Sir John Barrow's account. Here let me recommend, too, a little book entitled "The Story of Pitcairn Island," by Rosalind Amelia Young, a native daughter. My copy appears to have been printed in America in 1894 and comes to me via New Zealand. The author's father was a grandson of John Adams, one of the original mutineers of the "Bounty," whose death took place in 1829. It begins by rehearsing the events whereby seven of the white men who landed on Pitcairn Island were murdered, and the vengeance taken on the murderers by the white men's "widows." Two only, Adams and Young, were left, but Young died of asthma in 1800, leaving Adams alone with the twenty-three children born to the mutineers. The mutiny took place in 1789, and it was not until 1808 that the survivors on Pitcairn Island were discovered. Actual communication was not established with them until 1814, when H.M.S. "Briton" and H.M.S. "Tagus" passed near the island: "To the astonishment of those on board, the visitors from the shore, on coming near enough to speak to those on the 'Briton,' called out in plain English, 'Won't you heave us a rope now?' A rope was thrown them, and they were warmly welcomed on board. The mystery was explained when, on being questioned, they said that they were Thursday October Christian, son of Fletcher Christian the mutineer—strange how the mere setting down of the old name gives me a thrill—and George Young, son of the midshipman Edward Young. The former was named after the day and month of his birth. He is described as a 'tall and handsome young man, about twenty-four years of age, his scanty clothing consisting of a waist-cloth, while he wore a broad-brimmed straw hat adorned with black cock's feathers.' His companion, George Young, was said to be a 'fine, noble-looking youth, seventeen or eighteen years of age.' On being invited below, and having food set before them, they further astonished their kind entertainers by reverently asking a blessing before partaking of their food. In reply to a question they said that the good custom had been taught them by John Adams."

Why should not the film in the sequel which is left to it tell the whole romance? And nothing but the whole romance.

## 54. *The New Chaplin*

*February 19, 1936.*

UNTIL LAST WEEK there were four absolute silences—Outer Space, the grave, the Sphinx, and Charlie Chaplin's. Then on Tuesday, February 11, 1936, the number of those silences was reduced to three, since—in his new film at the Tivoli entitled *Modern Times*—Chaplin's voice was heard for the first time. It would not be true to say that he spoke, because he didn't. He sang, and his singing was enough to destroy something which all the world had cherished. The point—not whether Chaplin sang well or ill; he destroyed a mystery. Some pretend to see in the gibberish he sang, for they were words known to no language, a gesture of contempt, the street urchin's long nose at the talkies. But I fear me that this is merely the high-brow wish fathering the high-brow thought. In any case the jargon and the gabble have been misconstrued in lower-browed quarters, and one of my colleagues has committed himself to the fell statement that now that the silence has been broken, Charlie must make a talking film. I know of nothing in the world of the cinema which could be more repugnant to me. The notion of photographing the flora and fauna of Whipsnade and calling the result Shakespeare's "As You Like It," pales into insignificance in comparison with this monstrous folly. Napoleon at St Helena did not embrace a fate as tragic as would be Charlie Chaplin running away from that silence of which he was the Emperor to join the chatterbox rabble. This song of Chaplin's is forgivable only if it is unique, and if never again under any pretext whatever he utters spoken or singing word. "Loquor et qualis artifex pereo!" should be written in letters of gold on every wall in Charlie Chaplin's studio; this may be dog Latin, but it is good enough for a hafg-dog little fellow who is, and can remain, beyond rivalry in his art. Mr Charles Chaplin is, as all the world knows, a man of education, and probably knows Matthew Arnold's lines;

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,  
Self-school'd, self-scanq'd, self-honour'd, self-secure,  
Didst walk on earth unguess'd at. Better so!

Half the secret of that wistful tramp, that pilgrim of eternity in a finer sense than Byron ever knew, lies in the fact that he has walked the silent screen guessed at by all the world, yet never wholly revealed. Others, Mr Chaplin, abide our question. You are free, on condition that you speak no word. For if you do, millions of questions will be fired at you from millions of throats. And you may not be able to answer them.

How good is the new film? In my view it is much less good than either *The Gold Rush* or *City Lights*, because I happen to like the pathetic side of Charlie better than the clowning. If this sounds ungracious on the part of one who, twice at least during *Modern Times*, laughed till the tears ran down his face, I cannot help it. The trouble with the present film, if there be any trouble, is that the story is weak, and that we really care very little what becomes of the tramp, whereas in *City Lights* we cared enormously. In that film he took a great deal out of us, the spectators; in the present one we take all the fun we can out of Charlie and give nothing of ourselves in return. Again, is not the new picture a trifle too elaborate? It has been suggested that the film is intended to be an indictment of modern conditions, and, if so, I contend that you cannot see the machine for the cogs. It is arguable that Charlie's inability to avoid gaol is a protest against the economic conditions of to-day. But, again, I think this is too elaborate an interpretation. Possibly the idea is there; it has hardly germinated. A carping criticism might be that in this film invention fails a little, and that this should not have been the case when four years have been taken to whip up invention. But I think it is undeniable that in half-a-dozen instances, notably the blindfold roller skating on a perilous verge, Chaplin has used an old idea. On the other hand, the same charge could be made against Shakespeare, who could hardly see a girl without disguising her as a boy!

These be trifles, however. There are comic inventions in this film which transcend anything that Chaplin has ever given us. I think that is an accurate statement, for though the house may have laughed as loudly in the past, it has not in my experience laughed so loudly for so long a time as it did during the incident of the mechanical feeding. In this film there are three episodes where the delirium is of first magnitude. The first episode is the mechanical feeding. The second is that in which Charlie's foreman gets wedged in the machinery and cannot be released because the machine has stopped for the lunch hour. Here is more feeding, done by Charlie with unimaginable solicitude for his im-

prisoned chief. The third occasion is still concerned with feeding. In this Charlie has become a waiter at a night club. You have seen a cork bobbing about a yard or two out at sea, and how the tide will almost wash it up, and then carry it out to sea again. So Charlie, caught with a roast duck and a bottle of Chianti in a tide of dancers, and endeavouring to convey the platter, held high above their heads, to a hungry guest on the shore. These are the major riots, and, of course, there can be no enumerating the minor ones. There is some story of a waterside waif played by Miss Paulette Goddard. We believe in this about as much as we do in the waterside waif's long and beautifully polished nails. The film as a whole is one more justification of the star system of acting and encourages me to preach once more my tireless sermon : that the age which has great actors does not need to bother about team work. I will compromise to this extent, that the duty of the team is to pull together, but that its reward will be to be totally ignored. There probably are other actors in the Chaplin film, and they probably acted well. I did not notice them. The music, which Mr Chaplin has himself composed, is remarkably good, and I place it on record that over an hour elapsed before I realised that the film was a silent one. One last thing. In a civilised world there will be a repertory of films, and one will be able to say that one will spend the evening at a Charlie Chaplin picture just as, thanks to the Old Vic, we still elect to see a Shakespeare play.

## 55. "Hamlet" Ahoy!

April 1, 1936.

I ONCE KNEW AN ACTOR who told me with bated breath that he had been cast for the Second Sailor in "Hamlet." Hereby hangs a tale. Perpend. Mr Korda is, I hear, to produce a film of "Hamlet" with Mr Robert Donat in the name part, and my blessings go with the venture on condition that the First Sailor, let alone the Second, speaks no more words than are set down for him. "But there are no sailors in 'Hamlet'!" I hear the irritated reader exclaim. To which I reply in Beachcomber's best manner to Prodnose : "Away, fool!" In "Hamlet" there are, of course, *no sailors that matter*. There is an

unimportant First Sailor who delivers to Horatio the letter in which Hamlet explains how it is that, having been despatched to England, he is returned to Denmark : "Ere we were two days old at sea, a pirate of very warlike appointment gave us chase. Finding ourselves too slow of sail, we put on a compelled valour, and in the grapple I boarded them ; on the instant they got clear of our ship ; so I alone became their prisoner. They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy ; but they knew what they did ; I am to do a good turn for them." Now let Mr Korda not do a bad turn to Shakespeare's great play. Let him not under any circumstances whatever show Mr Donat taking command of the ship over the head of a pusillanimous Captain, climbing the rigging, spying out the enemy, compelling valour, boarding the pirate, and bargaining with him for his freedom. A long experience of the films has taught me that if a thing can be done wrong, it will. Almost the most important thing in that great epic of the sea known as the "Mutiny of the 'Bounty'" was Captain Bligh's voyage in the long-boat, and presumably that was why in the film it was reduced to something well under five minutes. Quite the least important thing in "Hamlet" is the sea encounter which I confidently expect to see occupying a full half-hour of the film. Now Shakespeare was no fool. A shipwreck being essential to "The Tempest," he showed us one. And we cannot doubt that if the pirate incident had been essential to "Hamlet" he would have shown us it. He didn't, and that's the end of the matter. Or should be.

This is the point at which we have to meet the statement put forward on behalf of the screen that in representing Shakespeare its function is to show the things which Shakespeare couldn't. I deny this *ab initio* and *in toto* ! There is almost nothing from Macbeth's blasted heath via the storm in "Lear" to Owen Glendower's ghostly music which Shakespeare could not represent, or failed to represent when he wanted. The object of screening Shakespeare is so to present the play in the new medium that it leaves the film-goer with the old impression. In the beginning mistakes were, of course, to be expected, and we now realise that it was because the gauze mills of America were made to work overtime that Shakespeare's fairy play was turned into a midsummer nightmare. Up to now these errors have persisted, and we have always read long accounts of how in the shooting of *As You Like It* Miss Bergner has sat for hours on the edge of a pool, mum, but expressively watching gentlemen in waders prodding cranes and waterfowl into activity. But Mr Korda must not be a Czinner in this respect ; he must not play,

ducks and drakes with tragedy. Now this is a matter requiring the nicest discrimination and the finest critical tact. It might be necessary in "Macbeth" to show that preliminary battlefield in which the Norwegian foe had dismayed Macbeth and Banquo "as sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion." We know that Banquo is to prove a gentleman on whom Duncan could build an absolute trust, and all along we suspect the contrary of Macbeth. But Duncan has his famous "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face!" In other words, fair may be foul and foul fair. This contradiction between aspect and character is the very essence of the play, and it is quite possible that a preliminary battle scene may be necessary to establish this. Similarly in "Othello" it may be necessary to show the battles, sieges, fortunes, the moving accidents by flood and field, the being sold into slavery, the men whose heads did grow beneath their shoulders—in short, all those traveller's tales to which Desdemona did "seriously incline." These things are, indeed, essential to the play, for it is by them that Othello's valour is established. It is his deeds and not his looks which win Desdemona's heart and so dispose of the colour difficulty. Indeed, Othello says the first and implies the second. But there is no suggestion anywhere in "Hamlet" that his seamanship and capacities as an all-in wrestler with pirates and subsequent bargaining are significant. Indeed, to dwell on these things, which contradict and make inexplicable Hamlet's first characteristic which is vacillation, would have done infinite harm to the play. And this is the reason why Shakespeare disposes of them in a letter. On the other hand, it may be legitimate to show Ophelia drowning in the glassy stream, because death by drowning comes within the category which the stage of Shakespeare's day, or even of any day, cannot show. I think it likely that if Shakespeare could have shown this he would, and this is the cinema's only justification. And for lots of reasons, for which I have no room here, there *must* be lots and lots of Fortinbras whose drums ought to sound during the "How all occasions" soliloquy.

## 56. *An April Grouse*

*April 22, 1936.*

THE MORE I SEE OF FILMS the more I wonder whether we are justified in considering them from an aesthetic point of view. Wouldn't it be wiser, and incidentally save a lot of ink, just to say : "Here is an illiterate, uncultured, wholly vulgar series of animated photographs put together for the greatest pleasure of the greatest number!" and leave it at that? Fifteen years ago I was writing about Charlie Chaplin : "It is not denied that there is a natural fun about our hero which is not subject to reason ; his moustache, like the eyebrows of Mr Robey or the head-gear of Mr Churchill, approaches the border-line which divides the higher genius of man from the lesser works of God. There is in his transmutation of bedspread into dressing-gown a comicality which is one with the comic spirit and indivisible. Since both are invested with 'constellatory importance,' kinship is attained with the laughter of the spheres. The more I cast about for the why and wherefore of this absolute thing, this humour which is a part of Original Creation, lent to Charlie at birth, now worn by him as a mantle, the more I am teased out of thought. . . . I know that many people look upon Charlie Chaplin as a figure frolicsome and free. 'Hey, but he's doleful!' seems to me the more fitting note, and the one I think this little clown will strike in the future. . . . I see him at this juncture as Sir Joshua saw Garrick : a figure torn between rival mistresses, endeared to the softer, a shade apprehensive of the sterner Muse." Now in 1936 I am content to regard Chaplin as a funny little man with a unique and happy gift of tears. But I should no more dream of writing an article about his "art" than I should dream of criticising an Isle of Man motor bicycle race in terms of Russian Ballet.

Consider the foregoing with reference to Mr Fred Astaire. To me Mr Astaire is a very good dancer, who, in the course of an evening's entertainment, can be pleasurable watched for some twenty minutes. When partnered by Miss Ginger Rogers, say twenty-five minutes. My experience of the films in which they perform together is that, apart from the dancing of these two artists, they are deserts of witlessness.

is only fair to say that I have not seen *Top Hat*. Nor will I. I have not seen *Follow the Fleet*. Again, I will not. I saw this pair in *Roberta* on a wet night at Blackpool, and vowed that rather than drown in another dose of such inanity I would climb the Eiffel Tower hand over fist and commit suicide in somebody's backyard. I will go farther and say that not for twenty minutes of Irving or Sarah Bernhardt would I again endure such drivel. Now hear my esteemed colleague, Miss Lejeune : "The first thing about Fred-Astaire's genius is Fred himself. You merely set that fact down and leave it." But does Miss Lejeune leave it ? Only after she has expended a whole column on it. Now listen to one of Miss Lejeune's paragraphs : "If Fred Astaire were the cleverest dancer in all Christendom he wouldn't be where he is to-day if the world didn't love him. That is the first thing, and the essential thing about him. You can't analyse it. You can merely record it. More than Chaplin, more than Disney, he has caught the affectionate imagination of the people. I have met lots of people who do not like Chaplin. I have heard of a number of people who are bored by Disney. But I have never known anyone who did not like Fred Astaire. Somewhere in his odd monkey-sad face, his loose legs, his shy grin, or perhaps the anxious diffidence of his manner, he has found the secret of persuading the world." In other words, what is at the root of Astaire's success is appeal, and the particularly insinuating form of it which gives people the mothering complex. All right, I don't mind. Astaire does in dancing exactly what James Welch used to do in acting. But the world did not go mad about Welch as it has gone mad about Astaire. Appeal to-day rules everything, and I do not believe that there will be a future for any great actor or actress unless it can be established that she was a dear and he was a pet ; or vice versa. Miss Lejeune nearly hits the nail on the head in another paragraph when she says : "Fred Astaire's style has one quality that is notably lacking in the cinema as a whole—its clean-cut accuracy. In a cinema that goes continually soft on you—an entertainment of blurred outlines and romantic evasions—that clearness is infinitely stimulating." But why does Miss Lejeune go soft on Fred Astaire ? Why doesn't she see that criticism's business with Astaire's acrobatics is to decide whether in their medium they are as good as Nijinsky's dancing or Rastelli's juggling ? Or, if you like, John Roberts's billiard playing or W. G. Grace's batting. Nobody in my young days wanted to mother Roberts, or hoped there was no Mrs Grace, or half-a-dozen brats tugging at the paternal beard. Roberts, Grace, Rastelli, Nijinsky—all these in my day would have excited the

same admiration if they had performed in a mask. To-day, if you please, we are to admire Mr Astaire's heel and toe exhibition because of something lovable in his appearance. Chaplin, says Miss Lejeune, "in a pinch, is too loosely emotional." Let me suggest to my colleague that whether anybody is pinching them or not, to-day's film audiences are never anything except loosely emotional.

And how the film magnates trade on this ! I see by my morning paper that a Hollywood producer is negotiating with an English nobleman to make two pictures in Hollywood next year. The producer is reported as saying : "I have been discussing the matter with Lord — and hope to fix it up with him before I leave for Europe next week. I have no definite parts or stories in view yet, but I would certainly be starring him in the pictures, not giving him minor rôles." And still we are asked to take the cinema as an art and to regard those who pose before the camera as artists. It may be that Lord — is another Garrick who, we are always told, when he first stepped on to the stage was a master of his art.

But no word of this natural artistry is mentioned. Instead, we are invited to gaze upon a photograph which shows a carnation, a cravat, a wing collar, and a profile. It is an exquisite carnation, a perfectly tied cravat, a beautifully laundered collar, and an exceptional and unexceptionable profile. The caption is : "Lord — ; Hollywood is eager for him." I think it should read : "Hollywood is eager for *them*." I suppose in some six months or so Miss Lejeune will be telling me that "somewhere in his aristocratic lineaments, his spotless linen, his elegant neckwear, and shy buttonhole, Lord — has found the secret of persuading the world." His Lordship has certainly persuaded Hollywood, and that's a start !

## . 57. Billing and Cooing

June 10, 1936.

A WELL-KNOWN ACTOR of the legitimate stage imparted to me a secret which he said was unwhisperable even in the film studios where everybody knew it. The secret concerns the steps taken by film companies to make a star out of any actress who is not conspicuously stellar.

A company having on its hands, say, Miss Turtle Dove, finds that not even billing will endow her cooing with genius ! What does the film company do ? It puts on its thinking cap and proceeds to engage one, two, or more well-known legitimate actors—sometimes the number is as many as fourteen—whose united efforts make for the star a milkier way. What happens is that the public, having seen some real acting, associates that real acting with the star, who thereupon shines with a reflected glory. This, it seems to me, has been more or less General Film Distributors' way with their film at the Plaza called *Limelight*. To anybody acquainted with this knack of suggesting talent by radiation it would almost seem that General Film Distributors had had the uncomfortable suspicion that the star of *Limelight* might stand in need of these adventitious aids. If Miss Anna Neagle can act as well as one suspects she can, why not give her the chance to prove it instead of pushing her off the set every two or three minutes and pushing on somebody who can undoubtedly act ? I was talking to another film director the other day who was proposing to cast for one of the greatest rôles in romantic drama another actress in whom I have not up till now discerned sufficient talent to appear as Principal Girl in a pantomime and say Bo ! to Mother Goose. "I know all about that," said the film director testily, "and am coping with it. I don't intend to let her loose for more than ten seconds at a time !" Miss Neagle's appearances in this film are equally fleeting. When she catches her lover in the company of an aristocratic young woman she immediately pops behind a piece of scenery to see what they are up to ; when she sees her lover off by the boat-train and in the next compartment beholds the aristocratic young woman, she immediately pops behind a pillar to wonder where they are off to. If Miss Neagle is indeed the one ewe-star of British films, then I think a chance should be given to her to coruscate. At the present moment I am totally without evidence as to the little lady's capacities, having unfortunately forgotten everything in connection with those two dreary films about Nell Gwynne and Peg Woffington. Miss Neagle is immensely pretty, but then so is every young lady I meet in my walks about the chaste and salubrious neighbourhood of Muswell Hill. Also, I suffer from a complete disability to remember what any film star looks like except Garbo and Hepburn. These two faces seem to me to have a gloomy significance, like Wastwater on a dull day. Whereas every other film star impresses me like the dimpling waters of Bassenthwaite. One thing the film mind has not yet discovered, which is that every great legitimate actress has had the power in some moods of looking

ugly. Rachel in French tragedy could look like all the lost tribes of Israel rolled into one. Sarah Bernhardt could put on a credible representation of an alligatress having a brainstorm. Mrs Kendal, that monument of bourgeois plainness, could look like Table Mountain struck by lightning. Mrs Patrick Campbell, loveliest of women when she chose, could look like six Medusas. Now, apart from Garbo and Hepburn, I know of no film star who ever looks like anything except a beauty parlour's shop-window. That is why I completely forget them, all film stars, with my two exceptions, being living embodiments of Wilde's phrase : " Once seen, never remembered ! "

Miss Neagle, then, must not take it amiss if I am unable to remember what she looks like. As for her talents as an actress, I shall venture to wait until she is given something to act. This lukewarmness should not distress Miss Neagle, who must be basking as film star never basked before in the sunshine of Mr Sydney Carroll's critical smile. Mr Carroll has written :

" I am annoyed with Herbert Wilcox. He is, in my view, one of England's best picture directors. He controls one of England's finest actresses in Miss Anna Neagle. His financial resources, now that he is allied with C. M. Woolf, should be sufficient for him to achieve his finest ideals. Yet here he is in *Limelight*, at the Plaza, contenting himself by ' stunting ' a male character at the expense of as brilliant a female star as he is ever likely to handle in his lifetime. The light has been focused too much on the man and not enough on the woman."

I have been blamed for comparing present-day actresses with the famous great actresses of the past. I have been told that it is because I am senile and gaga, that I do not consider Miss Tippet the equal of Bernhardt and Miss Muffet the peer of Ellen Terry. But Mr Carroll goes one better ; he compares Miss Neagle with stars as yet unborn and to the detriment of the latter. That's what I call handsome ! But why does not our Sydney do it in verse in the manner of the famous epitaph :

Underneath my praises solemn  
Lies the subject of this column,  
Target for impassioned pothes  
Film, ere thou canst screen another  
Fair and learn'd and good as Neagle,  
Goose turns gwan, and swan turns eagle !

The film, of course, is a syrupy concatenation to win all British hearts. There is a street singer who can read music and in twenty

minutes memorise two numbers. He takes a brilliant audience by storm and by the aid of a larynx which singing in all sorts of streets and weathers has not impaired. He appears on the stage for the first time and delivers his imbecile ditties completely unperturbed by a ballet of twenty-four young women executing "Les Sylphides?" or something of the sort in the background amid apple boughs. He is also master of himself under what normally would seem difficult circumstances. How would you, reader, like to go on the stage without any experience dressed as a Red Indian and croon by a camp-fire, while from a palanquin descended Miss Tilly Losch proceeding to go Gothic in gold lame? This is what actually happens. I fault Mr Wilcox, however, for introducing into his picture so brilliant an actress as Miss Ellis Jeffreys. Talent like E. J.'s turns what is known as film acting into mud, and that is all there is to be said about it! And why, oh why, did Mr Wilcox allow Mr Jack Buchanan and Mr Frank Boor to attend a party without removing their hats? This film has not even the excuse of being called "Top Hats." I am certain that of their own volition Jack would not be such a cad or Frank such a boor.

## 58. *Bergner as Rosalind*

*September 12, 1936.*

THE FIRST THING to be said about *As You Like It* at the Carlton Theatre is that it has all other film versions of Shakespeare beaten to whatever is the elegant word for a frazzle. Throughout the whole of Dr Czinner's production I did not detect anything which would have caused the author to turn in his grave. There were one or two moments when those august remains might have been supposed to stir uneasily lest worse befall. But it didn't, and the moment of danger soon passed. I refer particularly to the super-grandeur of Duke Frederick's Palace. In the mind's eye one sees<sup>3</sup> the home of Celia's father as something Tudor, Warwickshire, and leafy, with a thickish wall or two and possibly an odd turret. What Dr Czinner gave us was a colossal affair in white marble with floors of porphyry or something so polished that one expected at any moment Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to announce themselves as the Duke's guests and proceed to execute a *pas de deux*.

All this part of the film was a little like the Ziegfeld nonsense over the way at His Majesty's. But there, I think, was a pardonable extravagance. After all, film audiences when they go to a cinema expect to see their money's worth, and there is nothing particularly visual about the Forest of Arden.

I think, by the way, there might have been a little more pasture-land, since even Shakespearian sheep need grass and there was nothing for these flocks to do except nose among the roots for truffles. I forget to whom the cottage belonged in which Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone took up their triply celibate abode. But in the film he must have been a shepherd who had been enamoured of Motley's scenery for "The Happy Hypocrite" and had carpentered accordingly. These things, however, are not of very great importance. The point is whether the spirit of Shakespeare's text was preserved. It was, and what is even more remarkable is that the greater part of the text itself was preserved also. There were, of course, some harmless, necessary cuts, though I venture to think one of them harmful and unnecessary. Charles, the wrestler, in reply to Oliver's perfectly prosaic : "Where will the old Duke live?", has the answer : "They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him ; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England : they say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world." The last half of this lovely passage was omitted, and the omission is the one really bad mark which I have to record against this film.

By the way, isn't it time somebody made a collection of the exquisite things which Shakespeare threw to his minor personages ? The prose of *As You Like It* has a quality of its own, and for me this note of mingled gaiety and tenderness is not struck again in English literature till we come to the poetry of Tennyson. I say "for me," since I do not expect prosodist or pedant to agree. I have never known a dactyl from a spondee, and have got to the time of life when it would be improper to meddle with these mysteries. Anyhow, here is one of the loveliest things in the play thrown to a mere wrestler. Lots of similar things will occur to every reader :

The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day :  
 Now spurs the lated traveller apace  
 To gain the timely inn . . .

is spoken by a First Murderer, while "Charles' wain is over the new

chimney!" is given to a Carter. But I am divagating, which will never do. I am aware that readers who have persisted so far have only done so in the expectation of hearing about Miss Bergner. Patience, good reader, we shall come to Miss Bergner by and by!

After the text comes the scenery, and here one could say that Nature has done the Forest of Arden very well. The music when it is not by Dr Arne is by Mr William Walton, and I should not be at all surprised to hear that he had composed it in a box at Covent Garden during the intervals of "The Ring." It is extremely Waldvogelish, and perhaps Dr Czinner has engaged Covent Garden's bird, which warbles neatly and has the merit of not drowning the speech. The play has been cast with care and skill, and the acting—apart from Miss Bergner, to whom we are coming presently—has the true English and Shakespearian ring. Mr Laurence Olivier, who plays Orlando, has not been on the scene two minutes before he shows how much progress he has made in the art not only of poetic diction but of poetic feeling. Orlando is generally regarded as a part for a stick and the sort of thing Mr Kendal played in his youth. Mr Olivier plays the lover with great feeling. Mr Leon Quartermaine speaks the Seven Ages of Man better than I have ever heard it. Many actors whose tones are honeyed too obviously speak out of a treacly mind. Not so Mr Quartermaine, who seems to think the thing as he goes along, and so avoids the pitfall of a mere recitation. I wish some of our younger actors would take lessons from Mr Quartermaine. Mr Richard Ainley might set the fashion. When Silvius says that to love

—is to be all made of fantasy,  
All made of passion, and all made of wishes ;  
All adoration, duty, and observance,  
All humbleness, all patience, and impatience,  
All purity, all trial, all observance . . .

he is not an auctioneer's clerk reading out the items in his master's catalogue. He is a young man in extremity of love, and racking his mind for its complete definition. He may know all about the first few ingredients of that definition and get through them quickly. But when he comes to "all purity, all trial" he is obviously thinking hard, and I am not sure that a very skilful young actor would not make a point of getting to the end of his invention and having to fall back upon a repetition of the word "observance." A German commentator would write a volume on this, and I have no doubt it will serve Mr Granville-Barker for a page. In my own mind I am convinced that the text is

corrupt here, and that the second "observance" should be "obeisance" or "obedience." However this may be, it does not alter my contention about the thoughtful speaking of Shakespeare. It was pleasant to see Mr Henry Ainley again, in the rôle of the Banished Duke, and more than competent performances come from Messrs Felix Aylmer, Austin Trevor, John Laurie, and Fisher White, and Mesdames Sophie Stewart, Joan White, and Dorice Fordred.

In one of Stevenson's best essays occurs this passage :

Who ever questioned the perennial charm of Rose Jocelyn, Lucy Desborough, or Clara Middleton, fair women with fair names, the daughters of George Meredith ? Elizabeth Bennet has but to speak, and I am at her knees. Ah ! these are the creators of desirable women.

The two sentences immediately preceding this are : "Who doubts the loveliness of Rosalind ? Arden itself was not more lovely." And the sentence following my quoted passage is : "They would never have fallen in the mud with Dumas and poor La Vallière." Let us now do a simple exercise in logic. The quality which Stevenson has in mind of binding together the heroines of Shakespeare, Meredith, and Jane Austen must have been something other than loveliness, since La Vallière had this quality and to spare, and still she falls into the mud. The link through Meredith's women between Rosalind and Elizabeth I take to be a certain highness of mettle. Rosalind is intensely patrician and this is one of the qualities Miss Bergner has not got. There is a moment in this film when Miss Bergner turns head over heels, and if Rosalind was capable of this, then I shall consent to Miss Edith Evans performing the same trick next time she plays Millamant !

Throughout the entire film I was not conscious at any moment of establishing contact with Shakespeare's heroine. That which is substituted is something else—something German, something *gemütlich*, and something nearer to Wagner's Eva than to Molière's Célimène. Nobody with a sensitive ear can fail to detect in every word that Rosalind utters the accents of a *grande dame* in the making. I have no doubt that in later life Rosalind became a very great lady indeed. Miss Bergner gives Rosalind every other quality that is to be found in the part except the wit. She has any amount of tenderness and gaiety. But both of these are artless as they were in *Escape Me Never*, whereas Rosalind does not utter a single word of whose value she is unconscious. There is one line in the part, however, which in the name of sanity and discretion should be cut. This is the line : "Pray you, no more of this, 'tis

like the howling of Irish wolves against the moon ! " Rosalind's English should be the best in the world, and the long " o " in " wolves " and " moon " sound like a parody of Miss Bergner's accent throughout the film. *Unser Shakespeare!* was a good German joke. But I do not believe that Shakespeare created a character called *Unsege Rosalind*.

## 59. "The Plough and the Stars"

February 17, 1937.

EITHER I AM VERY MUCH MISTAKEN or "The Plough and the Stars" is a great play. It looms greatly in the mind like some vast building seen at night which you cannot, perhaps, accurately size up ; one has to go back a long way to find anything finer than that last act. It might be objected that this is a mere bag of melodramatic bones, a glut of horrors in the Elizabethan sense. I suggest that such an objection would be founded less upon reason than upon the age's aversion from tragedy. Perhaps the world has supped too full of sorrow in these recent years to be eager for gratuitous presentation of grief. But tragedy is un-escapable both in the work in which it is presented and in the mind which conceives that work. This play is the outcome of a spirit strongly moved ; it is Elizabethan in scope, in temper, and in pity. It deals, as the reader ought to remember, with events which happened in Dublin between November 1915 and the following Easter. Its characters are the rag, tag, and bobtail of the slums, shiftless by nature, and romantic by temperament. They are all of them mighty phrase-makers ; they are soil for the most grandiose flowers of speech. Yet what a lot they are if we stop to consider them dispassionately ! There is Fluther Good, the drunken carpenter, whose abhorrence of the "derogatory" is only equalled by his knack of falling into it ; Young Covey, the fitter, who has a passion for communism in the abstract and a practical taste in loot ; Clitheroe, the bricklayer, whose patriotism and personal ambition are like a pair of horses pulling away from one another ; Peter Flynn, the mindless labourer, eternally maundering about the grave of Wolfe Tone ; Nora Clitheroe, sentimental, self-seeking, vaguely beneficent ; Mrs Gogan, the charwoman, with a ghoulish delight in all the appurtenances of death and burial ; Bessie

Burgess, the fruit-vendor, with vileness on her tongue and something that is not vileness in her heart ; Rosie Redmond, street-walker and pure pragmatist. But it is the business of the dramatist to consider passionately, to abound so much in sympathy for his creatures that they take on life. These projections of Sean O'Casey's imagination live, and live with such an urgency and veracity that you feel moral censure to be impertinent. You may be appalled; but you do not blame ; these people are alive, and you refrain from judging. But it would be a mistake to call the play gloomy throughout. It is nothing of the sort. It moves to its tragic close through scenes of high humour and rich, racy fooling about which there is something of the Elizabethan ring.

Hear now some of this play's tremendous dialogue. Here is a minor scene concerning no more than the catching of a common cold :

Mrs GOGAN : Oh, you've got a cold on you, Fluther.

FLUTHER (*carelessly*) : Ah, it's only a little one.

Mrs GOGAN : You'd want to be careful all th' same. I knew a woman, a big lump of a woman, red-faced an' round-bodied, a little awkward on her feet ; you'd think, to look at her, she could put out her two arms an' lift a two-storyed house on th' top of her head ; got a ticklin' in her throat, an' a little cough, an' th' next mornin' she had a little catchin' in her chest, an' they had time to wet her lips with a little rum, an' off she went.

justly (a little nervously) : It's only a little cold I have ; there's nothing

Flutherit' ong with me.

derogatory wress' uno ; there's many a man this minute lowerin' a pint,

Mrs GOGAN : I din' t' out a winner, or doin' work as you're doin', thinkin' of a woman, or pickin' ~~the~~ <sup>is</sup> dhrivin' up to his while th' hearse dhrawn be th' horses with the black plums <sup>is</sup> dhrivin' up to his own hall door, an' a voice that he doesn't hear is muttherin' in his ear : "Earth to earth, an' ashes t' ashes, an' dust to dust."

FLUTHER (*faintly*) : A man in th' pink o' health should have a holy horror of allowin' thoughts o' death to be festherin' in his mind, for (with a frightened cough), be God, I think I'm afther gettin' a little catch in me chest that time. It's a creepy thing to be thinkin' about.

Mrs GOGAN : It is, an' it isn't ; it's both bad an' good. It always gives myself a kind o' thresspassin' joy to feel myself movin' along in a mournin' coach, an' me thinkin' that, maybe, th' next funeral 'll be me own, an' glad, in a quiet way, that this is somebody else's.

FLUTHER : An' a curious kind of a gaspin' for breath—I hope there's nothin' derogatory wrong with me !

And now once more the story is repeated. The story is the old one of how, when it deals with great material, the cinema surely, remorselessly and determinedly lets you down. "The Plough and the Stars,"

which I have seen several times, never fails as a play to move me as a great masterpiece. I have always found myself thinking of it for days after a performance. I had forgotten all about the film at the Regal called *The Plough and the Stars* before I had crossed the pavement and hailed a taxi. The interesting thing about the play is the grandeur, the rich humanity of these mean and petty squabblers. Fluther Good, when portrayed by Arthur Sinclair, was of Falstaffian size. With regard to him, as of the actor Munden, Lamb would have said that a pint of porter contemplated by him amounted to a Platonic idea ; he understood a gill of whiskey in its quiddity ; he stood wondering, among the shattered roofs and falling timbers, like primeval Man with the sun and the stars about him. In the play the Young Covey of that lovely and ever-lamented actor, Sydney Morgan, was a true member of Falstaff's army. Well do I remember thinking how much of Mistress Quickly there was about the Bessie Burgess of Sara Allgood, and how Maire O'Neill's Mrs Gogan perfectly fulfilled one's idea of an Irish Doll Tearsheet of our day. It was like seeing Shakespeare come to life again. Barry Fitzgerald, who plays Fluther in this film, is a delightful actor in his way. But it is a little way. He does not dominate the scene as Sinclair did. His performance does not carry. You do not wait for him to reappear, and when he does he has to start all over again. He is not a main pillar of the film, but an ornament. I hardly noticed the Young Covey ; and the women, with the possible exception of Una O'Connor as Mrs Gogan, are just nothing at all. Always excepting Barbara Stanwyck, who as Nora insists on being a great deal too much. From the beginning of the film until the end she never stops emotionalising ; and since, to use the best Marx phraseology, I "dislike her, anyway," this hysterical fussing doesn't help. Finally, Preston Foster's John Clitheroe begins well enough, but just wilts away.

The truth is obvious. Sean O'Casey writes a tragedy in four acts, three of which are indoors while one other takes place on the doorstep of a tenement house. The play is concerned entirely with what goes on in the minds of the characters, until the last minute, when the soldiers come in through the window. The screen adaptation is scheduled to run just over the hour, and half of this time is taken up with the main streets of Dublin, and English soldiers careering about in armoured lorries, together with a full representation of the capture of the Post Office. The result is that O'Casey's tragedy is kicked into a corner, and we witness something which you can hardly tell from the film that depicted the Sidney Street Siege except that it is less exciting.

O'Casey's play is crammed full of magnificent prose-poetry ; there isn't a line of any kind of prose or poetry in the film. If I be confuted by passages taken bodily from the play I shall retort that they have lost so much savour in filming that they have become unrecognisable. The only phrase I recognised was Bessie's remark to Mrs Gogan : " You mind your own business, ma'am, an' stupefy your foolishness be gettin' dhrunk ! "

## 60. Chinese Bunk

April 7, 1937.

I HATE WET BLANKETS. One of the horrid things in criticism is to like something rather less than you are supposed to. An almost certain way of making anybody dislike anybody else is to tell them they will like them exceedingly. (The holiday spirit being still upon me, I am too lazy to disentangle the last sentence.) Now it so happens that I have not yet got into the fortunate position of being a tremendous admirer of the writings of Mrs Pearl Buck, one of the reasons doubtless being that I have not yet read that book of hers which is most generally esteemed. Now, why have I not been a Buckite ? I think the reason is that I largely mistrust English novels about foreign parts. I do not think it possible for any Chinese lady, however brilliant with her mind as well as with her pen, to get under the skin of, say, a Lancashire cotton operative, a Durham collier, a Cockney bank clerk, or a centre-forward in professional football. Why, then, should any English lady be able to get under the skin of a Spanish matador, a Russian moujik, an African witch doctor, or a Chinese peasant ? People tell me that Pierre Loti got well under the Basque skin, and equally well under the Icelandic and the Japanese. I just don't believe it. I believe that these books of Loti, which I have known intimately, merely express what Loti would have felt had he been born a native of these other countries. I have been moved to look up what I wrote about another novel by Mrs Buck, and I find this, written a year or two ago :

" The dust cover of ' East Wind, West Wind ' quotes opinions of such ecstasy concerning Mrs Buck's previous work that the inevitable happened—I was disappointed. One critic quoted is not sure that ' The Good Earth ' is not the finest book of the last five years. I can only say

that the present volume is not by at least fifty the finest book that has passed through my hands in the last five months. I shall say that Mrs Buck's handling of the subject is distinctly ahead of that of the average English writer, whose only notion of China is to assemble on a musical comedy stage a number of almond-eyed gazelles to whom some giraffe-like creature in spotted muslin—only the dramatic critics write of this kind of actress more politely—"explains in song and dance the ways of English countesses."

And now I come to the film called *The Good Earth* which has gone off with such a bang at the Palace Theatre. My chief difficulty with this is that it didn't seem to me to have anything very much to do with China, a country about which I know nothing whatever except what I have gleaned from one of Lamb's best essays—though I admit that this was old China rather than new!—and one of Théophile Gautier's most exquisite poems. Add Octave Mirbeau's "Le Jardin des Supplices" and lacerating recollections of Miss Lilian Braithwaite in a tea-gown spurning the advances of Mr Wu, who was wearing one also, and there the reader has all I know about China. Nevertheless, I did not feel that Mr and Mrs Chang, or whatever they are called, were remotely Chinese. I thought that Chang was just my old friend Mr Paul Muni giving an extremely good performance of what a very clever modern film actor thinks a Chinaman should be. And I also thought that Mrs Chang was just my young friend Miss Luise Rainer giving an exquisite rendering of what my clever Austrian actress imagines a Chinese peasant woman to be like. The whole of Mrs Chang's part was like the bedroom scene in *Escape Me Never*, with the addition of a bowl of gold-fish to give local colour. Miss Rainer's performance was superb, except that to moon about with a face like the back of the kitchen grate, whether it be Austrian or Chinese, takes exactly one-hundredth part of the ability required to play a rôle by Racine, Ibsen, O'Neill, or even Sardou, and that none of the younger critics of acting, film or theatre, has yet realised this or looks likely to. Therefore, I shall say that Miss Rainer's performance, while superb, is easy. What I want to see is Miss Rainer playing Camille and La Garbo playing Mrs Chang. We know that Duse, who was a really great actress, could and did run the entire gamut. The point is not made often enough that a performance may be superb and yet not difficult to do! Even if we give full marks to both these performances as fine performances, the fact remains that, in my view, none of them stepped two inches out of Hollywood. There were two real Chinese actors in the film—I allude to the speaking parts—who simply made

nonsense of Mr and Mrs Chang. The proper way, of course, was to cast two Chinese players for the two major parts, which would probably have torn up the film in another direction. In other words, exposed it for the essentially Western conception that it is. I do not believe that any ageing Chinese wife receives the advent of a second, younger, and more beautiful one with an expression of something half-way between resignation and beatitude, and wholly Burne-Jones-like. Nor do I believe that a Chinese landowner would forgive his son for flirting with his second wife merely because he helped to turn the hose on a handful of locusts, or millions of handfuls of locusts. I do not believe that in the same circumstances an English farmer would forgive his son for carrying on with his stepmother merely because he had helped to put out a fire in the stackyard. And perhaps least of all on the night in question did I believe in the second wife, who was Miss Tilly Losch, going all Buddhist just as she goes all Gothic, and just as she would if you asked her to go all Rosicrucian.

To tell the truth, of which I am horribly ashamed, I found the whole film a little pretentious and rather boring. How, by the way, any Chinese artist would laugh at the Western notion of employing ten thousand people to suggest a revolution, knowing that it can be perfectly well done with a couple of stove-in shots and two or three Chinamen nailed to the shutters ! If you want to convey the idea of numbers you nail one of them upside down. Every good stage producer knows perfectly well that the way to represent a crowd is to use five people, not four, which makes two pairs, or six, which splits up into two trios, but five, which divides naturally into a pair and a trio. All this business of employing ten thousand people merely means that Hollywood hasn't the vaguest notion of film producing. I would back a Stanislavsky to give a better effect of numbers and employ not a soul above two hundred. In irrefutable support of my argument, let me say that the storm in which not more than a score of figures were utilised, and most of the time only two, was by far the finest part of the film. This was real film art, whereas the much-vaunted locusts were merely toy-shop nonsense.

## 61. "Lost Horizon".

*April 28, 1937.*

AT THE FILM LUNCHEON to Mr Frank Capra who, I then learned, had produced *Lost Horizon*, the Tivoli's new picture, my old friend and colleague, Mr Hannen Swaffer, was in the most terrific form. I always think of Swaffer as an actor who has strayed into journalism. Anyhow, it is undeniable that he stages a magnificent, imposing, and hilarious figure, like that of some unreverend archbishop or ascetic-on-leave. The business of all Hollywood producers is to keep people from seeing the wood for the trees, and Swaff neatly turned the tables by telling Mr Capra that if in his Coronation airings he ventured into the park he would be unable to see the trees for the wood ! I should hate to have been in Swaff's place because my views on producers are, to say the least of it, peculiar. In the theatre I have long regarded them as a pretentious nuisance. The great actors of the past needed no producing, and I should just like to have seen what happened to the producer who told Sarah to stop screaming or Mrs Kendal to speak up. But in the film world it is doubtless different. Actors and actresses proper are people of talent and sometimes genius. Film actors are actors who can fill dressing-gowns nicely, and the last word was said about film actresses by the critic who declared that they had not enough brains to be barmaids. "They might bring you the correct drink or the correct change, but not both !" Of course, the films need a producer ! It needs somebody to decide which of the leading man's profiles to use, to tell the leading actress to stop smiling when the script says her husband has been run over and her baby mangled, to tell the camera man where to put his box, and when to start turning the handle, and when to stop. Yes, the film producer is a very important person !

It is an enormous pity that producers have so much money to spend, because a large proportion is necessarily thrown away. Since part of *Lost Horizon* takes place in Tibet, Hollywood conceived the extraordinary notion that natives must be used who could be mistaken for Tibetans. Mexicans, Hawaiians, Philippinos were interviewed "by the hundreds" before being rejected. This is so like Hollywood. Any

non-Hollywood producer would merely send for a book of national types. He would then decide whether a Chinaman would do. He might conceivably send for one Chinaman before rejecting the type. But to send for hundreds is nonsense. "Finally," we read in the film's accompanying brochure, "the Columbia casters' search led to the Pala Reservation of Mission Indians at Oceanside, California, and the, sudden realisation that American Indians of certain tribes looked and acted as much like Tibetans as the Tibetans themselves. So, weeks in advance of actual shooting, native atmosphere players were selected from the Indians of California, Arizona, and New Mexico to populate the elaborate Tibetan village in the beautiful Valley of the Blue Moon." I did not read my programme until after I had seen the film. But the moment I cocked an eye at the natives I knew that they were Red Indians. So what's the odds? I should have known if they were Mexicans, Hawaiians, or Philippinos, and again it wouldn't have mattered. The whole art of acting is the game of Let's Pretend. I can understand a producer who says: "No Tibetans, no picture!" And I can understand the artist producer who says to somebody in shirt sleeves: "Shove those niggers on and tell them to act like Tibetans!" But to go to enormous expense and travel to import people who are not Tibetans and don't look it, seems to me to be insane. Hear the brochure again: "Horses to represent the shaggy, short, mongrel-bred equines of the Tibetan plateau land were assembled from Indian ponies on the reservations. Highlander cows were obtained to replace the native yaks that take the place of cows in Tibet, and real Tibetan terriers were imported from China to represent the dog population. With native blacksmiths, pottery makers, weavers, and other artisans of the mysterious land at work on their strange, crude machinery, and native women and children dressed in their clothes, wearing head-dresses of one hundred and eight braids of hair, the picture presented in *Lost Horizon* is the first complete and accurate one of life in Tibet ever to reach the screen." But does anybody really want an accurate picture? Would one braid short of the one hundred and eight braids of hair have incommoded anybody? I only remember one yak in the picture, and should not have been in the least upset if it had been any kind of shaggy American cow with papier-mâché horns. All this enormous expense was incurred merely to provide a Tibetan village of the kind which does not exist in Tibet! At least, I do not think that even Mr James Hilton, who wrote the novel, intended his Tibetan village to look like a bit of the Wembley Exhibition. Then, if there is this craze for accuracy,

why should it be midwinter, with howling snow-storms at one spot, while within five minutes' walk small Tibetan maidens are plunging naked into sunlit pools and larger maidens are wearing sprigged muslin and no hats? And will somebody please tell me how they got the grand piano along a footpath on which only one person can walk at a time with rope and pickaxe and with a sheer drop of three thousand feet or so? In my view, nearly all the money spent on this part of the picture has been mis-spent. A good deal has been wasted, too, on making the Shangri-La Monastery look like the country-house of a Florenz Ziegfeld or the Beverley Hills apartment of any film nitwit. On the other hand, full value has been got out of every ha'penny, and there must have been a good many of them, spent on the terrifying scenes on the mountain-side. These are truly awe-inspiring, and towards the end of the film I found myself being worked up into a state of genuine excitement. There is one superb piece of acting in the film, that of H. B. Warner as Chang, who looks exactly like a thin version of Hugh Walpole. Sam Jaffe dies as High Lamas ought to die, though how they live remains their own affair. Ronald Colman is neither better nor worse than some twenty other good-lookers would be in the same part. Jane Wyatt's Sondra is a good bit of work. One of the Tibetan ladies looks as though she had come out of *Ye Mikado Tea-House*, the other one less so. The really wonderful thing about *Lost Horizon* is the way in which Capra has preserved the atmosphere of the book. Taking it by and large—with not quite enough “by” and rather too much “large”—I must declare this to be the best film I have seen for ages.

## 62. *Victoria the Little!*

*September 29, 1937.*

HERE IS A FILM which is going to be shown to the uttermost ends of the earth, translated into Eskimo, Hottentot, and Zulu, broadcast, televised, gramophoned, and heaven knows what, and there are no programmes at the Leicester Square Theatre to say who's who! We have been told *ad nauseam* how Mr Herbert Wilcox and Miss Anna Neagle spent their last farthings upon the shooting of the final scenes, from which I can only conclude that they had not the few pennies

necessary to print a few programmes. The management will no doubt protest that a list of the characters and who plays them flickers for a moment on the screen. But I cannot memorise at this speed, and therefore I can only guess at what actors played whom, and have no idea at all what company sponsors the film or where it was produced.

In the matter of *Victoria the Great*, as the film is called, I am in something of a difficulty. This is because, between you and me, I have lately had a little too much of Queen Victoria's courtship of Prince Albert. There was the Housman play when I was in New York, followed by the same thing when I got home. But I agree that not all the millions of this country will be able to go to America or even contrive a visit to the Lyric Theatre, and that they, too, are entitled to have a suck at the Victorian lollipop. All records agree about the essential queenliness of Victoria from her earliest years. The present film in its early part presents Victoria as being arch after the way of the servants' hall and uppish in the manner of a housemaid on her Sunday out. The note is struck when the seventeen-year-old Princess walks down the stairs to receive the news of her accession. There is a Victorian phrase about "flouncing out of the room"; this princess flounces into it in a way impermissible to anybody who was what the Victorians understood by a "young lady." And then there is this film star's accent, overlaid by layer after layer of the best suburban refinement. At any moment we expect Miss Neagle to toss her pretty head and say: "I hope it keeps fine for you, Albert!" Instead of which she tosses her pretty head and flounces hither and thither. One feels that Mr Anton Walbrook's Albert, who is gentleman as well as Prince, would have declined the proposal and gone back to Germany murmuring the German equivalent for "baggage." After what seemed an age of pertness the man next to me whispered: "Is she never going to grow up?" The film pretends to be about Victoria the Great, and lo and behold, the major part of it is devoted to showing Victoria as a "madam"!

There is a passage in Miss Edith Sitwell's "Victoria of England" which, as I glared at this film, came insistently to mind:

Queen Victoria's destiny was to mount to the summits of greatness, but not in youth or in her middle years. Only as an old and desolate woman, alone on those mountain peaks to which she had risen by such long and difficult ways, would she see the future of the world and of her people with the clear eyes of the eagle. In old age, the wisdom of the serpent, the heart of the lion, were hers, but not in youth, though her heart was always great.

The result of wasting so much time on the royal billing and cooing

is that there is only half an hour or so left in which to see the Queen deployed as the world figure of those last tremendous years. Both Mr Housman's *Victoria Regina* and this film show Prince Albert persuading the Queen to prevent Palmerston from provoking America to war. This was in 1861. I have always thought that a better example of the putting down of the tiny but commanding foot occurred in 1875. Better because unprompted. Hearing that Germany proposed to attack France to prevent the French starting a war of revenge, the Queen "told Mr Disraeli that the conduct of Germany was intolable, that the talk of a war of revenge was sheer nonsense, and that England must, at the head of the other powers, inform Germany that Europe could not and would not stand for another war." It is a world pity that that foot was not in existence in 1914 to tell Germany that England could not and would not stand for the invasion of Belgium. Of this side to Victoria the film shows us little or nothing, preferring a lengthy and unrelieved exposition of the widowhood. It is characteristic of the cinema that the moment the film arrives at that part of its subject which is most interesting—the essential greatness of the Queen—it immediately loses faith in itself; or perhaps faith in the millions who are going to see the film. At least, I conceive that to be the reason why at the end it breaks into colour, with an effect like that of a picture book on which a six-year-old has been messing about with a box of paints. The result is to make the last half-hour of the picture look like something enamelled on pottery and marked "A Present from Blackpool."

It has often been observed that anybody taking his notion of the history of the time from the novels of Jane Austen would remain ignorant of Trafalgar and Waterloo. The makers of *Victoria the Great* resemble Jane Austen in that they give us no notion whatever of the England over which Victoria ruled, except for one shot depicting a rabble demanding the repeal of the Corn Laws. A more imaginative grasp would have given us a shot of the young Queen at Buckingham Palace in juxtaposition with another one of those lodging-houses intended to shelter three hundred persons but which, according to Engels, averaged two thousand seven hundred and forty nightly tenants piled five and six deep. They would have shown the Chartist Riots and what led to them, with a glimpse of Botany Bay. Instead of which we get pretty pictures of the Queen being attentive to one Prime Minister and snubbing another, without any suggestion of Melbourne's incompetence or of Palmerston's genius. Next to nothing about Disraeli, worse than nothing about Gladstone. But it is useless to continue.

The point is that the film's title demands at least an epitome of the great reign, and all that the picture amounts to is a novelette filmed round a royal love-story. The reader may ask whether Mr Housman's play is anything more than half-a-dozen anecdotes strung together on a thread of orange-blossom. The answer, I think, is that the difference between theatre and film is the difference between a drawing-room and a Durbar. Indeed, Noel Coward's *Cavalcade* conveyed far more of the essential greatness of Queen Victoria, though it gave us no more than her funeral.

It is an odd thing that almost anybody, except Miss Neagle, can look like the later Queen Victoria. We are already familiar with the triumphs of impersonation of Miss Helen Hayes in New York and of Miss Pamela Stanley at the Lyric, and though one salutes a brave attempt I am not convinced that Miss Neagle succeeds. The film ends with a shot of Victoria, after the Diamond Jubilee, nodding to her former self and looking the living image of Miss Edna May Oliver. This last shot not only blasts all that has gone before, but on the night I attended blew me out of the dress circle into the middle of Leicester Square.

### 63. "Cyrano" in English

November 5, 1937.

MESSRS HUTCHINSON HAVE JUST ISSUED Mr Humbert Wolfe's translation of Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac." This for a long time was on the point of being filmed by Mr Korda with Mr Laughton in the title part, and then wasn't. In a very long preface Mr Wolfe examines at great length the reasons put forward for the abandonment of this project. Personally, I can think of a simple one. The play is just not suitable for filming. Apart from the magic of its verse it is a dull play, and having seen Coquelin and Loraine in it, I never want to see it played again. That, says the cute reader, is not the point. The point is whether a film audience which has never seen anybody except those great film stars, Dwight Dago and Gutta Percha, would enjoy it. My view is that it would be bored stiff.

Leaving this, I find the preface more interesting because of what Mr Wolfe has to say about the difficulties of verse translation. I cannot help thinking that in many places he has burked his job. A test case

is the famous ballad, "Ce sont les cadets de Gascogne," a magnificent *cadenza* wrought by Rostand on the vowel "o." Here, of course, Rostand was lucky in that for "Gascogne" he could find rhymes in "carogne," which means "carrion," "ivrogne," which means "drunkard," and "renfrogné," which means "frown." In English there is no equivalent for these. But Mr Wolfe might have done better than his second stanza. The French original is :

Œil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne,  
Moustache de chat, dents de loups,  
Fendant la canaille qui grogne,  
Œil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne,  
Ils vont,—coiffés d'un vieux vigogne  
Dont la plume cache les trous !  
Œil d'aigle, jambe de cigogne,  
Moustache de chat, dents de loups !

This has already been translated with fair literalness by the Misses Gladys Thomas and Mary F. Guillemand :

Eagle-eye, and spindle-shanks,  
Fierce moustache, and wolfish tooth !  
Slash-the-rabble and scatter-their-ranks ;  
Eagle-eye, and spindle-shanks,  
With a flaming feather that gaily pranks,  
Hiding the holes in their hats, forsooth !  
Eagle-eye, and spindle-shanks,  
Fierce moustache, and wolfish tooth !

Now listen to Mr Wolfe :

They're eagles stooping to the kill,  
though rusty as a moulted rook,  
but rooks that tumble from a still  
sky, eagles stooping to the kill.  
They've never paid their tailor's bill  
for all their carved ancestral look  
of eagles stooping to the kill,  
at whose descent the heavens shook.

This is nothing near the French. And where was Mr Wolfe's ear that he did not perceive that

though rusty as a moulted rook,  
but rooks that tumble from a still  
sky . . .

is pure Tennyson, and "In Memoriam" at that !

Mr Wolfe has, of course, seen his principal difficulty, which is that of putting Rostand into English decasyllables :

The task before me was to provide an exact translation which would not merely reproduce every noun substantive, adjective, and proper name, but which would, if possible, capture the spirit of the play, and above all present at least that semblance of poetry which Rostand so brilliantly contrived. Gigantic as was this difficulty, there was a further one at the very outset. Rostand wrote his play in Alexandrines. English prosody compelled me to substitute a decasyllabic line. I was therefore two syllables short from beginning to end—a quite hideous handicap when the vast efflorescence of Rostand is remembered.

To get over this difficulty we are told that Mr Gilbert Miller suggested that the poet should borrow a metre from Kipling, and we are given a witty sample of what the result would have been like :

If you want to know our business and the sort of chaps we are,  
we will answer, if you'll let us, with a sword.

For we've hitched our blooming wagon to a very crimson star  
which its Roman name was Mars, me noble Lord.

Though our blood is blue as Cæsar's with a touch of pirates' black,  
and our quarterings would give a herald cramp,  
if you ask for our addresses we will holler till we crack,  
"Any place where there's a battle or a camp."

And Mr Wolfe adds : "That might have done, but anyhow I stuck to the French with the result which you can see for yourselves in the text."

My remark here is that it would have done very well indeed for the cinema, *since it would have made the same effect for the fourpennies and ninepennies that Rostand's original made on the stalls of the Porte St Martin.* Mr Wolfe decided to stick to the French mode and spirit, with the result that Mr Korda realised that the film would have been a flop. And realised it just in time !

In nothing does Rostand show his virtuosity better than in his mastery of rhyme. "Cyrano" in the French tinkles from end to end with pretty jingles. Consider the happy, childish, self-satisfied delight of :

Tom nom est dans mon cœur comme dans un grelot,  
Et comme tout le temps, Roxane, je frissonne,  
Tout le temps le grelot s'agite, et le nom sonne !

And compare this with Mr Wolfe's :

Your name within my heart is like a bell  
homeward to ring love's wandered flock and sound  
with every stroke the heaven your name has found.

But where is the tinkle ? In the one you can almost see the poet patting himself on the back ; in the other you can visualise the translator labouring at a stiff job.

Now let us take the famous passage :

ROXANE : Eh bien ! montez cueillir cette fleur sans pareille—

CYRANO : Monte !

ROXANE : Ce goût de cœur—

CYRANO : Monte !

ROXANE : Ce bruit d'abeille—

CYRANO : Monte !

CHRISTIAN : Mais il me semble, à présent, que c'est mal !

ROXANE : Cet instant d'infini !—

CYRANO : Monte donc, animal !

For this Mr Wolfe provides the following :

ROXANE : Climb then, and pluck the nonpareil of roses.

CYRANO (*pushing Christian to the balcony*) : Climb !

ROXANE : Taste to the heart—

CYRANO : Climb !

ROXANE : That the bee discloses.

CYRANO : Climb !

CHRISTIAN (*hesitating*) : But the moment has slipped by for action.

ROXANE : This summer of the south.

CYRANO (*pushing him*) : Up with you, fiction !

This is lameness itself, Rostand's point here is not that Christian is a cheat but a handsome torso with head to match.

The truth of the matter is that the French play is an epic declaimed by a tight-rope walker, and that any Englishing must bring the funambulist to terra firma, where his performance loses its wonder.

## 64. "A Farewell to Arms"

*July 13, 1938.*

THE OTHER DAY a young friend for whom I have considerable respect squared up to me and said : "Your attitude to the films is all wrong !" I have said that I respect my young friend. I respect him because he

is enormously intelligent. But he does not seem to *know* anything; or at least not to know any of the things which, when I was a young man, constituted knowledge. For example, I discovered the other day that he hadn't realised that Ouida was a woman, had never heard of Mr Chadband, didn't know that "On, Stanley, on!" were the last words of Marmion, and had never read Meredith's "Love in the Valley." On the other hand, he knows who wrote things like "Caliban" upon Setebos" and has Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" practically by heart. But that is only because my young friend was at Cambridge, where, after all, something must be crammed down young throats. His knowledge of music is equally extraordinary. He has no ear whatever for Mozart or Beethoven, and despises Wagner as a vulgar row. On the other hand, he is continually humming the great theme from the last movement of Sibelius's No. 2, his sole alternative to this being something called "I've Got You Under My Skin." I said just now that this typical young man despises Wagner. The clever thing about him is that he is able to despise composers without having heard them, on the lines of foolish people who run down Glyndebourne without having visited it! Let me give an example of this. One of the most remarkable effects in *A Farewell to Arms*, which has been revived at the Plaza, occurs when, in the very moving death scene, a hidden orchestra begins to play, and play very well indeed, the Liebestod from "Tristan." In the middle of it my young friend turned to me and said: "Hollywood certainly knows how to get the right sort of music written for it!"

It was this young man who, as I say, squared up to me and swore that my attitude to the films is all wrong: "You criticise films, James, as though they were theatre, whereas they are cinema." I think I know what he means. If in a play a young lover calls to visit his mistress who lives on the first floor, all you see in the theatre is the appearance of the lover at the drawing-room door. In the cinema you see him get out of his car, with a close-up of his hand on the bell, then a view of the smirking porter, after which there is a cork-screw ascent of the staircase with the ceiling revolving on its axis, and a pair of trouser legs making scissor-like ascent. If it is one of your highbrow camera men you will see a shot taken somewhere below the ankle and up the trouser leg! All my younger friends are enormously impressed by this sort of thing, which they call "camera angles." The important thing, according to these camera fiends, is not what anybody says or does in a film, but how freakish they can be made to look while they

are saying or doing it. A little of this "art of the cinema" is a very good thing so long as it is used to enhance meaning and not merely as a substitute for meaning. For example, the fact that *A Farewell to Arms* is taking place in Italy is not conveyed to us, as the director probably thinks it is, when Adolphe Menjou lets off a string of gabble in the accents of a Cypriot waiter asking whether you will take the eighteen-penny lunch or *à la carte*. The notion of being in Italy is very finely conveyed when for a moment the lovers squat by the hind legs of an equestrian statue and the girl's head is allowed to nestle against its hock. For Italy is a land of equestrian statues, and cannot be mistaken for England, where the effigies of famous field-marshals are stuck upon something which is a compromise between a dromedary and an antelope.

To come now to the film itself. This was always a grand piece of work, and it loses nothing in its very welcome revival, for the reason that Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes are both first-class players. By this I mean that both can act in the theatrical as distinct from the cinematic sensé. I have no patience with calling film-acting, acting. A man pulls faces in front of a camera for a month, at the end of which the best faces are chosen and joined up. This I take to be the art called *montage*. Very well, then. On this principle I am prepared even at my age to run a mile in very good time if I can take a month over it and run two yards every ten minutes or so ! Now, Gary Cooper gives me the impression that he would still be able to act even if he was allowed to do each shot once, and once only. In other words, even if he had to run right through the part at one taking. And I know that Helen Hayes can act, because I have seen her do it in New York. Her performance in the present film must be one of the best she has ever given, and the death scene ranks high even in the mind of one who has seen many in this kind and remembers only two. These were Sarah Bernhardt's death scene in "La Dame aux Camélias" and an earlier one of hers in "Frou-Frou." Of this the savagely austere critic of the "Manchester Guardian" wrote : "It is not contested that Mme Bernhardt knows how to die." When I say that the other afternoon Helen Hayes gave me very nearly one-hundredth part of the emotion of those two dyings, the reader will be able to guess how fine a performance this is ! It is good cinema, too, for when Cooper lifted Hayes off the bed the sweep and fold of her nightgown was the exact replica of the sweep and fold in Isolda's Liebestod. And then the usual nonsense happened. Within less than five seconds after the curtains had closed on the tragedy, we were in the thick of a comicality entitled *Manhattan Music Box*. Why

don't film managements realise that the function of the news-reel is to divide the good pictures from the rubbish? Going back to the film again for the moment, there is a really remarkable piece of acting by Jack La Rue as the priest. To conclude with a compliment, let me congratulate the Plaza upon something for which I was asking only last week—a programme in which I can read the only two things I want, the names of the characters and who is playing them.

## 65. "Marie Antoinette"

November 16, 1938.

THE ENGLISH HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE to understand the French dislike of Marie Antoinette. There are two reasons for this: The first is the sentimental one of seeing in the unfortunate Austrian who was to become queen of France, a double of the unfortunate Frenchwoman who was to become the queen of Scots. The second is our old friend, and every schoolboy's enemy, Edmund Burke. To this day I can recite the passage beginning: "It is now sixteen or seventeen years since the queen of France, then the Dauphiness, at Versailles," and ending: "The age of chivalry is gone." I know all about "cheering the elevated sphere," "glittering like the morning star," and how "ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards." It has been left to Mr Hilaire Belloc to put a finger on the weakness here. He says simply: "There is no need to recall the rhetoric of Burke, for Burke was not by birth or training competent to judge." But I still think Mr Belloc should have added something more, which was Burke's insufficient knowledge of the French people. Our great historian is extremely interesting on this matter. He cites Horace Walpole, who was familiar with the court of Versailles, saw the queen in all her young and active presence at her sister-in-law's wedding feast, and "thinks there never was so gracious or so lovely a being." And Mr Belloc regrets that another Englishman who saw the queen from behind a balustrade at Fontainebleau has left no account: "The old, fat, wheezy man, who now seems to us England incarnate, stood there in the midst of the public crowd behind the railing, blocking its shuffling way as it defiled before royalty dining, and took in all the scene. The impression upon

a man of such philosophy must have been very deep. I believe we have no record of that impression remaining." The fault was James Boswell's for not being there to " draw " Johnson.

The point about the English admiration of Marie Antoinette is the point I have so often made about the English liking for French actresses totally unheard of in France. The English have never understood what a French playgoer demands in an actress, and what every French subject demanded from a queen of France. Mr Belloc is French enough not to have this English limitation. He writes : " It is of great interest to note that public dissipation, glowing familiarities, long-lit and brilliant nights, an ardent pursuit of what had become to her a very necessity of change—all, in a word, that was beginning to fix her subjects' eyes upon her doubtfully, and not a little to offend the mass of the nobility around her, all that was found in her insufficient to the niceties and balance of the French temper, was easily excused by foreign opinion. Just that something which separates the French from their neighbours was lacking to the foreign observance of this foreign woman. Her carriage, which to the French was a trifle theatrical, seemed to foreigners queenly ; her lively temper, which the French had begun to find forward, was for the foreigner an added charm." Even so, I think the French would have forgiven Marie Antoinette her faults as a woman. What they could not forgive was her dosaulting as a stateswoman. This is a difference not easily drawn by the English foreigner who is much more moved by a ruined personality than by ruinous politics. Marie Antoinette was imperialist and absolutist. She had no understanding of, or sympathy with, the working classes. She was at once obstinate and astute, vacillating and blind. Not content with knowing herself to be disliked, she insisted that her husband must be unpopular, too. Able and willing to prevent him from carrying out his policies of reform, she had not enough will-power to enforce the substitution of her own programme. She was a born intriguer, and for every private letter which conveyed her real mind she wrote two public ones with the opposite intention. In a word, she was utterly feminine.

How much of all this is it supposed is shown in the film at the Empire ? The answer, of course, is nothing whatever. We see a young Austrian princess who is the exact spit of Miss Luise Rainer's notion of Frou-Frou. That is to say, she does a lot of scampering *mutatis mutandis* ; which means taking into account the more imposing staircases of Versailles. When Miss Norma Shearer moves in this film, there is so much swish of skirt and rustle of silk that you can hardly hear what she says. There is

something, but not very much, about the famous diamond necklace. Nothing whatever about Marie Antoinette's indifference to the people, and no sign that she took the faintest interest in affairs of state. What, then, fills this film which lasts two hours and twenty-five minutes? The answer is an impassioned love affair with a young man who conceives for the queen the same kind of adoration that Rassendyl had for the Princess Flavia. Whether Marie Antoinette was or was not the mistress of the handsome young Count Axel De Fersen may or may not be established; even if she was, the liaison had nothing whatever to do with her downfall. Which, of course, is why the film is built up on it! And how good this film might so easily have been! It is needless to say that no expense has been spared. I can well imagine that the table legs and the chair arms are exact copies of originals. I have no doubt that the settings of the queen's jewels are identical. The crowd scenes are magnificent in effect. Mr John Barrymore is excellent as Louis Quinze. Whether he is or is not like Louis Quinze in appearance is perhaps not important. What does matter is that Louis Quinze appears to have been very like Mr Barrymore! Over Mr Tyrone Power's Count Axel I must be permitted to draw a veil. Such vowel sounds could only become a Muswell Hill linen draper's assistant who has Americanised his speech from what he has heard at the ninepennies. Mr Robert Morley, combining his talent for looking extremely like Oscar Wilde and not at all like Dumas *père*, achieves a very creditable Louis Seize. The whole film is abundant, dazzling, and splendid. At the same time the result, to my way of thinking, is as disappointing as a patty without any oyster, or a *vol-au-vent* whose contents have gone with the wind. And Norma? Let it be said that, being given a great deal to do but no part, she does it superbly and looks ravishingly lovely. What a clever girl she is!

## 66. "Wuthering Heights"

May 10, 1939.

I HAVE MADE FIVE SEPARATE ATTEMPTS in my lifetime to read Emily Brontë's masterpiece, and have never got beyond the fifth chapter, for the reason that I can never fathom out who's who, and that I

am unable to go on reading any book unless I know who's who. How, then, asks the astute reader, do I know that "Wuthering Heights" is a masterpiece? Dipping, just dipping, dear astute reader!

Now let me be serious. The most tremendous line that ever fell from the lips of a man in love is Othello's: "She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell." And I do not think that the whole of the English language can show anything to match this until we come to Heathcliff's: "May she wake in torment!" It may possibly revive the reader's recollection of the great book I have not read if I give the whole of the wonderful passage: "'May she wake in torment!' he cried, with frightful vehemence, stamping his foot, and groaning in a sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion. 'Why, she's a liar to the end! Where is she? Not *there*—not in heaven—not perished—where? Oh! you said you cared nothing for my sufferings! And I pray one prayer—I repeat it till my tongue stiffens—Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! O God, it is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! I *cannot* live without my soul!'" Then consider how it goes on, and how masterly the narrative power: "He dashed his head against the knotted trunk; and, lifting up his eyes, howled, not like a man, but like a savage beast being goaded to death with knives and spears. I observed several splashes of blood about the bark of the tree, and his hand and forehead were both stained; probably the scene I witnessed was a repetition of others acted during the night. It hardly moved my compassion—it appalled me: still, I felt reluctant to quit him so. But the moment he recollected himself enough to notice me watching, he thundered a command for me to go, and I obeyed. He was beyond my skill to quiet or console!"

It says a great deal for the film version that one could have gone to the Gaumont Cinema with these two passages in mind and not have been disappointed with what one saw. I said to a "Wuthering Heights" expert: "I suppose you will tell me that the film does not come within a thousand miles of the book?" He replied: "On the contrary! It comes just within a thousand miles, and that's very high praise!" There are, of course, one or two obvious mistakes. (And this is the place to say that I have perhaps dipped in the novel more extensively than I think!) There is, for example, the absurd super-magnificence of

the Linton establishment at Thrushcross Grange. "Now droops the milk-white peacock like a ghost!" was presumably Mr Goldwyn's instruction to his producer. But that, dear Sam, refers to the lush lusciousness of Tennyson's England, and not to the bare bleakness of the Brontë country! Nor do I think that the Grange should have been built in the Italian Renaissance manner. Nor that it should have abounded in flunkies. No reasonable person will object to the heather, in view of the fact that efforts to import the right stuff to Hollywood were defeated by the customs officials. Nor do I mind if it is true that only half the story has been given. What is given is obviously the right half. More serious complaint, perhaps, ought to be the ending of the film, which is puerile, silly, and bathetic, giving us silhouettes of Heathcliff and Catherine walking hand in hand down the Yorkshire moors as though they were the tail-end of a Chaplin film, with a choir of angels in Metro-Goldwyn blast. Then again is there, perhaps, too much music throughout? Are not the novel's words good enough in themselves? In the last matter, however, I think that Mr Goldwyn's producer, Mr William Wyler, can be defended. Emily Brontë's words are good enough only if their hearer has a sense of words. Hollywood, having long ago stifled, overlaid, and killed that sense of words by the illiterate jargon of a thousand films, cannot expect that sense to be reborn for a particular occasion. The question to ask, then, is whether the film essentially reproduces the spirit of Emily Brontë's novel. And I am inclined to think that it does. One shudders to think what a mess would have been made of it if the acting of Heathcliff and Catherine had fallen into the hands of Clark Rooftree and Norma Sheepshearer! The pair chosen for the tremendous lovers have done all but magnificently. Not being Irving, Chaliapin, and Conrad Veidt all rolled into one, Mr Laurence Olivier does not give a superhuman performance. But the performance he does give is extremely good and suggests what I take to be very important, that somewhere in Heathcliff's dark soul there is a spot of something which in another world or dimension might grow to compunction. Or shall I put it that in this film Mr Olivier acts best when he acts least, and that he superbly portrays the dumb agony which the gipsy has in common with his animals? Miss Merle Oberon, not being a Rachel or even a Beatrix Lehmann, cannot give Catherine the full intensity the part demands. But she does pretty well, and, quite frankly, far better than I expected. After all, it is not Miss Oberon's fault that her get-up at the dance suggests that she has been to see Miss Anna Neagle as the young Queen Victoria. Besides these,

the film contains one very remarkable bit of playing. This is Miss Geraldine Fitzgerald's complete portrait of the foolish Isabella Linton who throws herself at Heathcliff's feet. There is sound acting, too, in all of the small and bad parts. But what on earth persuaded Miss Flora Robson to go all the way to Hollywood to play a part quite so small and bad as that of Ellen Dean, the old nurse who, pretending to tell the story, does nothing but fade in and fade out?

## 67. "Beethoven"

July 5, 1939.

REALLY, REALLY, REALLY! Has the distinguished film critic of "The Times" no sense of the audience for whom films are made? In the case of M. Abel Gance's *Beethoven*, now at the Curzon, he complains of "the vulgarity of a conception which sees in Beethoven's 'life and loves' the opportunity for a triangle romance allegedly 'immortalised' by a couple of sonatas and odd bits of symphonies. This French film about the great composer," he says, "may well offend the least sensitive, and will it not also bore those whom it does not shock?" Hasn't my august colleague grasped the fact that this romantic nonsense at least has a great man for its subject? And that that in itself is extraordinary. Some little time ago I made public complaint of the fact that the office boys in this country have no idea how, for example, Charles I met his end. I was at once bombarded with letters. One employer wrote: "Why should my office boy want to know how Charles I died? Charles never played for the Arsenal, nor hit a century against the Australians, nor played the lead in a film about gangsters and G-men!" Then there was a typist who, tossing her head in green ink on mauve notepaper, wrote as follows: "If it's history, I don't want to know it!" I see the typist's point of view. Cleopatra was a woman of some interest, and so, too, were Queen Elizabeth and Catherine the Great. There was also an unhappy lady called Mary Queen of Scots. But did any of these great women flounce out of a party in a temper because some other woman was wearing the same frock? And does any modern little girl think that Joan of Arc's behaviour before her judges can compare in interest and urgency with La Dietrich's behaviour on that recent

occasion? Should Marlene have stayed in the room or should she not? The question will doubtless be debated to the end of time. Should Joan have abjured her voices or not? What Boomps-a-Daisy expert cares!

And now to return to my colleague of "The Times." Will he not look at the matter in this light? He knows and I know that the passion of love in Beethoven's life was all-my-eye and Giulietta Guicciardi! We both know that the passion of love is of account among artists only when they are artists of less than the highest magnitude. That to a Balzac and a Beethoven the Hanskas and the Guicciardis are less than the dust beneath Mrs Amy Woodforde-Finden's chariot wheels. We know that a morning made up of quarrelling with his publisher, his impresario, and that infernal nephew—who so oddly reminds one of Samuel Butler's blackmailer, Pauli—we know, in so far as we are both of us working journalists, that a morning of this sort in a man of middle age looms far larger than half-a-dozen nights in the arms of half-a-dozen countesses. What would be of interest to my colleague and me would doubtless be a film showing what physiological fact made Beethoven write G flat instead of G sharp. No, foolish reader, I do *not* mean that Beethoven couldn't hear the difference between one note and the other! I am writing musicologically, in the best Ernest Newman manner, and discussing what it was in Beethoven's mental make-up which made him write this note instead of that. But does my colleague or does anybody believe that anybody would go to such a film excepting himself, myself, and possibly Mr Newman himself? Lastly on this point, does my friend not realise that an enormous number of people will be found listening and looking at a film concerning Beethoven about whom they know nothing whatever, whereas in the ordinary way they would be listening to nonsense about the Vernon Castles and the Astaires? I do not for a moment mind the present film's pretence that the "Eroica" was composed after the "Pastoral Symphony," or that Beethoven should be found alluding to the "Moonlight Sonata" by that name when, as every educated person knows, the title was given to it by a publisher. I agree that there is a great deal too much of that infernally hackneyed piece, and that the sequence in which, while Beethoven lies dying, a nun sings it to the words of the "Miserere," is monstrous. Nor do I believe that Beethoven, tucked away in the organ loft at Giulietta's marriage, would have performed his Funeral March instead of somebody's Wedding March. After all, Beethoven was a gentleman! These things are the price we have to pay for hearing

throughout the film quite a lot of quite good Beethoven quite well played. I am much more inclined to resentment when I find elementary spelling mistakes in the titling of a film on which a great deal of money has obviously been spent, the editors going wrong over the French words *orchestre* and *société* in large type ! I also fault this film for engaging two actresses who are so much alike that you cannot tell which is the clinging Giulietta and which the cloying Thérèse von Brunswick. Most I think I object to the atmosphere of the whole whereby it all seems to be part of some German light romantic opera with Willie Clarkson round the corner.

And yet the thing held me from beginning to end. I can prove that it held me by the fact that I entered the cinema in the very middle of the film and after Beethoven had gone deaf. I saw the picture to the end, and then, not out of duty, because I already had sufficient material for an article, but out of sheer interest, sat it round again ; and this in spite of the fact that I had to see (a) an intervening film about swans, which would have been quite good in its way but for the dreadful facetiae of the commentator, and (b) one of the worst Mickey Mice that I have ever seen. As I say, I sat the film round to where I started, and then found myself continuing to sit through a good deal of what I had already witnessed. I attribute this to the magnificent acting of M. Harry Baur, who made me feel more than once that I was actually in the presence of the great composer himself. The doctor friend I had with me is not a particularly literary nor a particularly musical man. And I think that his criticism admirably sums up this film. "What the devil do they want to talk for ?" he said. "And why bother about these silly women ? All I want to do is to look at that head and listen to the music ! "

## 68. Garbo

February 28, 1940.

"AND NOW, ON THE SUBJECT OF SARAH, I am sworn to an Iago-like silence. From this time forth I never will speak word !" An excellent vow fully meant, when years ago I made it in my first "Ego." And I have kept it reasonably well since. But, as all the world who

reads me knows, Bernhardt is to me what King Charles's head was to Mr Dick, and the world is now to suppose that somebody incavtiously brought up the subject of King Charles in Mr Dick's presence ! This is what has happcned to me in connection with the new Greta Garbo film, *Ninotchka*, at the Empire. Mr Campbell Dixon, of the "Daily Telegraph," begins it : "I would say Miss Garbo is one of the great actresses of the world, one of the very few whose passing would leave a great, unfillable void. It's no use parroting that she is not Bernhardt." And again : "Garbo alone gives the impression of being bigger than her rôle ; she alone, without tricks and 'hammy' fireworks, can dominate a scene quietly, even silently, as they say Duse did." And here is Miss Dilys Powell in the "Sunday Times" : "Whether or not Greta Garbo is a good actress I have no idea, but I am sure she is a great actress. . . . The good actor has the chameleon's ability of matching his surroundings ; his colour changes to suit his part. I am inclined to suspect that the great actor has the reverse of the chameleon's art ; he changes the colour of everything round him. Also he is of a size to fill the stage (or the screen) as well as transforming it. Greta Garbo, alone among contemporary film actresses, has this kind of emotional size."

Between them these two colleagues are responsible for a wonderful jumble of right and wrong, sense and nonsense. Mr Dixon, whether he knows it or not, is under the delusion that any actress who can act is necessarily "ham," and that the great actress is one who, instead of fulfilling her part, betrays it by blazing or mooning all over her author's stage in her own proper person. This is what Miss Powell calls being "the reverse of the chameleon." Agreed, O Dilys ! But don't you see that there are two ways of not being a chameleon ? It is untrue to say that Sarah was always Sarah ; it is true to say that Bernhardt was always one of many Bernhardts, since Phèdre, Pelléas, and Marguerite Gautier were all like Sarah but not like each other. This quality is the same which Max once described in Irving as "multi-radiance." Now my own eyes told me that when Duse played them, Adrienne Lecourreur and Mrs Alving were not only exactly like the actress impersonating them, but exactly like each other. But I have lots of evidence, apart from my own eyes, that Duse was, shall I say, uniradiant ? Of her Marguerite the French critic Lemaître said that she turned Dumas's courtesan into "une grisette extrêmement distinguée et un peu préraphaélite, une grisette de Botticelli. On ne se la figure pas un instant riant faux dans les soupers, allumant les hommes, s'appli-

quant à leur manger beaucoup d'argent, ni faisant aucune des choses qui concernent son état. Presque tout de suite, sans combat préalable, sans défiance, sans étonnement de se sentir prise, et prise de cette façon-là, elle donne son cœur à Armand. Elle a même trouvé pour cela un beau geste symbolique, un geste adorable d'oblation religieuse, que Dumas fils n'avait certainement pas prévu." Maurice Baring affirms this : "When Armando hurled money at Marguerite at the end of the fourth act, her cries, 'Armando ! Armando ! Armando !' and the look in her eyes as she uttered the cry, made you feel that an intolerable outrage was being done to something supremely noble." And I suggest that when Dumas fils turned that outrageous nymphomaniac, Marie Duplessis, into the single-hearted Marguerite Gautier, he went exactly as far as he intended, and that in making Dumas's character an example of supreme nobility, Duse was bettering instruction. Max said about her, that when she played "that soul of restless mischief, Hedda Gabler, Signora Duse suggested the weary calm of one who has climbed to a summit high above the gross world. She was as one who sighs, but can afford to smile, being at rest with herself. She was spiritual, statuesque, somnambulistic, what you will, always in direct opposition to eager, snappy, fascinating, nasty little Hedda Gabler. Resignedly she shot the pistol from the window. Resignedly she bent over the book of photographs with the lover who had returned. Resignedly she lured him to drunkenness. Resignedly she committed his MS. to the flames. Resignation, as always, was the keynote of her performance. And here, as often elsewhere, it rang false." And only last year, Gordon Craig was writing about this same actress : "She evoked the sadness of things supremely well—always that, on and off the stage. She seemed comfortable in grief. Her presence called out all except joy and fun. Her beauty somehow seemed linked by her for ever with sadness ; and the beauty outside her had to conform to the convention she established." So much for Duse. Now for Garbo.

I have always thought that Garbo was a great screen actress—nothing will induce me to call a woman an actress until I have seen her on the stage proper—magnificent along Duse's lines, but also capable of making successful raids into the Bernhardt country. A superb moper, her moping is more than life-size, reminding the spectator of the "coniferous moaning" of the tallest pine in the largest of her Swedish forests. And she has for me passed the Bernhardt test in a dozen films, including, if you please, *La Dame aux Camélias*. Judge, then, of my surprise when on going to the Empire I found my hopes in Garbo disappointed, and

my colleagues' dithyrambs wildly unfulfilled ! For in my view, Garbo in *Ninotchka* gives no performance at all. For half an hour she is glum in the stereotyped Garbo fashion. And then she is supposed to laugh, and doesn't. She opens her mouth wide and goes through the motions of laughing. But it is mirthless laughter, like the yawning of a horse. Look closely into this simulation and you will perceive that the simulator is not amused. Then she has a long and totally unfunny drunken scene, after which she spends the rest of the time looking like Norma Shearer's mother ! In my view this is the worst performance I have ever seen Garbo give, and it is made to seem all the worse by the brilliant acting of Ina Claire, who sounds all the notes of polished comedy. Garbo in this film has two notes, and two only ; the resulting see-saw achieves a monotony which for me kills the performance stone dead.

The film itself is in Lubitsch's best vein and extremely witty, which merely accentuates the poverty of the central performance. Instead of being the major plum in the pudding, Garbo's performance is the one piece of suet in an otherwise entirely delectable dish.

## 69. *A Minority of One*

April 3, 1940

CHARLES LAMB HAS A FAMOUS ESSAY, entitled "Imperfect Sympathies." These, of course, are exactly what we to-day should call "blind spots." Lamb begins his essay by confessing that he is a bundle of prejudices "made up of likings and dislikings—the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies." And he goes on to declare that his antipathies include Scotsmen and Jews. He sees the good points of all these people, and strives to like them intellectually. But the fact remains that there is something about both races which goes against his grain. What Lamb does not tell us is how far he would be influenced by nationality in art. Would he think less of a portrait because he happened to know that it had been painted by Raeburn ? And would he have disliked Rachel's *Phèdre* for the reason that he knew the great actress to be a Jewess ? I think the answers to both these questions would be in the negative, since I cannot believe that Lamb would have allowed his sympathies to interfere with his critical perception and taste.

Perhaps what I am trying to say is that some modern blind spots are more blind than any Lamb ever knew. In my own case I have to confess that whole areas of art of all kinds are cut off from me by my imperfect sympathies, or better, complete antipathies. Always with the exception of "Vanity Fair," I am unable to read the novels of Thackeray. I am unable to read any novel that comes within a thousand miles of any part of Germany at any period of that country's history, or having anything to do with the Low Countries or with the Napoleonic Wars. If anybody were to offer to pay my expenses for a journey to Mexico I should decline because of my complete lack of interest in everything connected with that country. I dislike heat, lizards, monasteries, and cacti, and as I have no desire to make the acquaintance of these things at first hand, why should I read about them at second? Nor would Australia or Persia tempt me, and I have not the faintest urge to go within smelling distance of India. The only reason I can read Kipling's Indian stories is that they are rarely about Indians. On the other hand, Africa is to my mind a place of complete enchantment. It is the same with the theatre as with books. I cannot abide murky comedies set in Spain. I flee from any playbill bearing the illustrious names of those celebrated dramatists, Quien Sabe and the Brothers Usted. So, too, with music. I run away from any programme on which the name of Schumann appears, and I have never concealed from myself the fact that whenever Schubert finishes a symphony, he finishes me. All this is wildly uncritical, and I try to do my critical duty by allowing for my antipathies as a golfer allows for the wind.

All of the foregoing ought to be entitled "Prelude to Pinocchio," for it is of the Walt Disney film at the New Gallery that I have to write this week, and I do so with the utmost diffidence since I cannot call myself a Walt Disney fan; or let me put it that I used to be a fan and am so no longer. Time was when the Mickey Mouse cartoon was to me the best thing in any evening at the cinema. Then came colour, and the Silly Symphony. Again charming. And then followed over-elaboration, and the, to me, supremely unfunny Donald Duck. So raucous and ear-splitting did this fellow become that during his later presentations I have often been compelled to leave the cinema and walk a little in the street outside. Then came *Snow White*, of which, I regret to say, I tired after twenty minutes, although twenty minutes of it seemed to me delightful. It was therefore in a mood of some trepidation that I went to see *Pinocchio*. Had not Miss Lejeune assured me that this was simply the finest film that had ever been made? And had not

a brother critic informed me that he had sat through the film twice in the same evening, once for his paper and once for his pleasure?\* To cut a long story short, I attended this film with a rigidity of attention worthy of Casabianca and a sentry in the front line. I watched the unrolling of this tale about a little wooden puppet who, if he behaved like a good little puppet and not like a bad little puppet, would be allowed to turn, into a real little boy. It makes an admirable fairy story, and my only trouble is that I just can't spend an evening over a book of fairy stories, or in looking at the pictures in a book of fairy stories, even when these have been drawn by Arthur Rackham. And Walt Disney's pictures are not, to my way of thinking, as good as Arthur Rackham's. Nor do I see any particular virtue in the trick of animation once the novelty has worn off. Indeed, there seemed to me to be only one grown-up moment in the whole entertainment. This was when *Pinocchio* became a successful artist and was put in a cage by the entrepreneur. This incident apparently symbolises the enslavement of art by commercialism, the subject about which Mr Cyril Connolly is so eloquent in the current number of his brilliant little magazine, "*Horizon*." Intrinsically, the film of *Pinocchio* possesses less than one-tenth of the invention of "*Peter Pan*" and none at all of that play's wit. Yet here are all my colleagues talking about it in terms not of whimsy *à la* Barrie but of allegory *à la* Michael Angelo.

And then there is its musical accompaniment. As I sat to attention I found myself wondering why I should find the maximum of delight in another fairy story, "*Hansel and Gretel*," and the minimum in this one. Perhaps the answer is that in any theatre or cinema I mind very much what I hear and not very much what I see. Given a musical score which was the equivalent of Humperdinck's and which a Prokofieff, Milhaud, or Walton would probably have been delighted to supply, then, opening my eyes every five minutes or so as I do at the ballet, I should have been enraptured and have come away from the New Gallery vying with Miss Lejeune and Mr Bergel in my admiration of what I should have been pleased to call a masterpiece. Making the necessary allowance for my lack of interest in fairy tales about puppets—the whole world of marionettes is perhaps my blindest spot of all!—I shall say that this is a very, very good film. The last half-hour of it, containing the whole sequence, seems to me to embody the mystical union of William Blake and Mr James Bridie!\*

## 70. *Too Much of a Good Thing*

*April 24, 1940.*

"WHERE SHALL I GO? What shall I do?" says Scarlett O'Hara at the end of *Gone with the Wind*, and receives from Rhett Butler the reply: "Frankly, my dear, I don't care a damn!" The trouble with this film, which lasts four hours, is that for the last hour and a half nobody in the audience has been caring what happens to anybody. But let not exasperation drive me out of my critical manners. It is obvious that I cannot know whether anybody else will find this film tedious; let me be content to say that I, personally, find the myth excessive. Still continuing to be critical, let me ask what it is all about, since it is to be presumed that a film which claims one's attention for four hours must be about something—in other words, that it must have a total gesture. Before I go any farther let me confess that I have not read the book, and am therefore unable to say whether the film is or is not a faithful version of Miss Margaret Mitchell's story.

Presuming that it is, I must still ask what the film is supposed to be about. The American Civil War? Yes, in the sense in which "Vanity Fair" centres in the Napoleonic Wars. But there is very little Waterloo in Thackeray's masterpiece, that battle merely providing a further step in Becky Sharp's career, whereas there is quite a lot of Gettysburg and Auster in *Gone with the Wind*. Indeed, there is far too much for this film's health since, while it is happening, one finds oneself wishing—or rather I find myself wishing—that the teller of the story would concentrate on history and cut that tiresome Scarlett out of it. All the war scenes are extremely well done; indeed, they are as good as D. W. Griffith at his best; which affords me an opportunity I have long wanted, that of saying that the crowd scenes in films have not, except in Russia, advanced one step beyond the work of that great pioneer. And they have advanced in Russia merely because the good directing and acting can make half-a-dozen skilled players look like five thousand. But that is another story!\*

Since the Civil War is not the theme, what is? I can only suggest the minxishness of minxes. Indeed, Scarlett is so declared a baggage

that I come away feeling that I have spent a long afternoon in the cloak-room at a literary Waterloo Station. This impression is accentuated by the likeness of the film to a heterogeneous collection of luggage left behind by one novelist after another. To begin with, there is a hint of Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye in a young woman who, to spite the man that she is in love with, marries somebody else. Next, we discover in Scarlett's passion for the soil of her native Tara something of an Emily Brontë heroine wuthering after the heights of Haworth. This accounts for the second husband. There follows all that angling for a third husband in the person of the masterful Rhett Butler. Here Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" seems to have got mixed up with one of the novels of Ethel M. Dell. Next, after sentimental ramifications unnecessary to explain here, since they are probably known to all my readers, we arrive at the moment when Scarlett loses her first child, and there is a slanging match behind closed doors between husband and wife which, if one could hear, would surely turn out to be Ibsen's "Little Eyolf" all over again.

Getting near the end of her tether—for it is a long tether that has no end!—Scarlett arrives at what we begin to think must be her last phase, that of Balzac's Valérie Marneffe chastened. But we are wrong; Miss Mitchell prefers Mr Eugene O'Neill's land-hungry Abbie from "Desire Under the Elms." For we are to leave Scarlett making tracks for Tara, not because of the harp which still hangs in its halls, but because of the radishes which still grow in its grounds. The happy ending dearest to the maker of wholesome plays, said C. E. Montague, writing before the existence of the films, ensures "that in fifth acts any leopards which gain the playgoer's regard should be left rigged out in snowy, curly lamb's wool. . . ." This, of course, applies equally to leopardesses like Scarlett O'Hara.

No expense has been spared on this glorification of what housemaids call "a little madam." Miss Vivien Leigh gives an impressive exhibition of all that slapping and flouncing which old-fashioned people call tantrums. I doubt whether the part could be played better by any star in the film firmament; Miss Leigh gives the whole of Scarlett's sluttishness to its last rinsing. Mr Clark Gable glowers to everybody's heart's content; Mr Leslie Howard displays his melting weakness at its best; Miss Olivia de Havilland gives a beautiful performance as a loyal wife; Miss Hattie McDaniel as a coal-black mammy very nearly redeems the picture; there is a great deal of treacly music; and the whole thing is bathed in colour like that of the best picture post-cards.

Whereby I have no doubt whatever that the picture will fill the Empire, the Palace, and the Ritz for months and months and months.

## 71. *Lovely Nonsense*

May 8, 1940.

ALMOST MY FAVOURITE NOVELIST is the late Mrs Amanda Ros. In her last published masterpiece, "Delina Delaney," there occurs a love scene which is the very spit and image of one of those affairs as expounded on the screen. Feeling "crimsoned, confused, and tartly smitten," Delina surrenders to Lord Gifford, after which we read: " 'It makes me almost die of disgrace to think of it,' she muttered. ' I already know that I have done wrong in fighting the fight of disobedience, and clinging to him who probably yet may steep me in disgrace. But heaven guide me to the bitter end ! ' Then she breathed, sighing heavily, inwardly saying again: ' Come, courage, come ! Heaven help me, else I dwindle into the puddle of shame, and damp not only my feet, but, alas ! my whole body.' " Were I a playwright I should at once set about dramatising this novel, and cast Miss Barbara Mullen for Delina and Mr Eric Portman for Lord Gifford !

For years I have been looking vainly for a successor to this book. The quest is, of course, hopeless as would be the attempt to find another Marie Lloyd or a second Little Tich. These masterpieces of art and nature are peerless, and so remain. Nevertheless, I was encouraged when the other day Mr John Mair in "The New Statesman" described a new novel as "that rare thing, a little gem of pure, pellucid, perfect silliness." Who would not have been heartened by such an extract as this? "When Carol noticed that 'Teresa, herself some one abnormally feminine, but now in this terrifying atmosphere quadrupled her personality, and in inverse ratio provoked his anger with an insulting virginity,' he realised that 'ahead of him lay the *tedium vite*, the *raison d'être*, the *sine qua non*, perhaps marriage, or God knew what.' " So I possessed myself of "Our Lady of the Earthquakes," and read on the very first page: "She was born in a small village below a volcano called Algaricocleznu in the South Americas. This volcano erupted once every month, accompanied by many earthquakes. All the villagers were

highly strung, especially the mothers, who prayed frequently for fine weather." And on the second page : " Be that as it may, an hour before Teresita arrived, Algaricocleznu erupted, showers of cinders, lava dust, and millions of scorched locusts fell around its foot, and, as though it were a performance, an earthquake shook the entire country, swallowing up two picturesque villages, upsetting a lake and drowning three thousand head of cattle and a school outing. The shock of the disturbance broke a seismograph in Peking, and knocked Teresita clean out of her mother's womb." Either I have been knocked clean out of my mind or " a school outing," placed where it is, is the pure and perfect chrysolite.

But humour is a ticklish business. Somebody said to me the other day : " This afternoon I went to call on a firm of lawyers called Messrs Peabody, Peabody, Slaithwaite, Arbuthnot, and Smith. I asked for the senior partner, whose name turned out to be Robinson ! " Does the reader think this funny or not ? But I must return to the new novel and to Teresita's mother, who is called Teresa and is, it appears, a French millionairess in love with Francis de Loigny, an airman who has just crossed the Atlantic in a blizzard. Francis faints on arrival at the aerodrome, and is taken care of by Teresa, who puts him to bed and sends his clothes to be fumigated ! He recovers consciousness to find Teresa sitting by his bedside, and we read :

" You must understand," she said, " I am very careful about the things to do, not anything vulgar or in bad form. I have very great connections. My uncle was the President of Peru, and fought a duel with my last husband. My first husband—"

" Your first husband," said Francis against his will.

" Yes, that was very sad, it was the only mistake I made. He was responsible for having my father shot."

" I see," said Francis, " and now, if you will . . ." He made as if to rise.

" Let me dry your head for you," cried Teresa in agitation.

" No thank you."

" It will freeze," said Teresa in doubt. She seized a towel and started rubbing his head in a sort of fury.

" I am used to these domestic things," she said quite gaily. " My first husband used to go swimming a lot."

" Really," murmured Francis under the towel, " and now, please—"

" Just a moment. We will talk after I have brushed your hair."

" I beg your pardon." The telephone bell rang. " Hullo, the taxi is waiting."

" Thank you. And the dressing-gown is coming up ? Thank you."

"What is that?" cried Teresa in a low, perturbed voice, her eyes fixed reproachfully on Francis's face.

"I am now going to lunch with the President of the Republic."

And what, the reader asks, is the point of all this? The point is that the film at the Carlton called *Typhoon* is exactly like a combination of "Delina Delaney" and "Our Lady of the Earthquakes"!

The heroine, played by Miss Dorothy Lamour, seems always liable to dwindle into the puddle of shame and damp not only her feet but her whole body, while the hero, played by Mr Robert Preston, is in continual need of having his hair dried. This is the first time I ever remember having seen either Miss Lamour or Mr Preston, and I am now ravenous for more. For their medium is that rare thing among pictures—the gem of pure, pellucid, perfect silliness! Miss Lamour as a child of about seven is launched by a shipwrecked and sinking parent into a boiling sea. Ten years pass and we see her as a lovely marooned virgin in a lovely maroon lava-lava, with eyebrows plucked and looking as though she has just stepped out of a Broadway beauty parlour. Her sole attendant is an ape, who appears to double the parts of butler and lady's maid.

Presently Mr Preston, also shipwrecked, is cast up on the island accompanied by Mr Lynne Overman, and the trio—quartet, if you count the ape—make innocent whoopee until the arrival of some excessively gaudy pirates who set fire to the brushwood. Our trio look like perishing when the timely typhoon arrives, and a wonderful affair it is!

I have no idea how this terrific business is done. It may very well be that the models are of the tiniest size on the scale of, say, the domestic bath-tub putting out the kitchen stove. But the result is realism itself; all this part of the film is extremely exciting. Finally, Miss Lamour meets with the fate that Delina feared, and gets damp all over, while we doubt whether Mr Preston's hair will ever be dry again. In the end the sun re-emerges, the trio find a rowing boat and, hoisting what looks like the famous lava-lava as a sail, they head for happiness and, if Hollywood can arrange it, doubtless luncheon with President Roosevelt. What happens to the ape we do not learn.

## 72. *Spotting the Director*

*August 14, 1940.*

LET US THRASH OUT this question of directing pictures and how much it matters. Readers may remember a statement in these columns a fortnight ago to the effect that no musical critic would be able to identify the conductor of a symphony orchestra if he wagged his stick behind a screen, whereupon that eminent critical fish, Mr Ernest Newman, snapped at the fly to the extent of a column, with promise of more to come. Mr Newman's principal point was that to make the test valid "we should have to hear the same work under Beecham with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, under Toscanini with his magnificent new American orchestra, under Koussevitzky with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under Furtwängler with the Berlin Philharmonic, under Stokowski with the Philadelphia Orchestra, under Bruno Walter with his fine Vienna Orchestra of long ago, and so on." My come-back to this is that the critics would be in a bigger fog than before.

Further, I maintain that all the musical critics, putting their heads together, would not know whether, under screen conditions, the soloist in Beethoven's C minor concerto was Backhaus, Petri, Schnabel, Moiseiwitsch, or Clifford Curzon. And that's not all. I don't believe the musical critics would detect anything odd if a composite band, drawn haphazard from six first-rate orchestras, were to give an unrehearsed performance under, say, Dr Malcolm Sargent; or that they would "rumble" anything if my five pianists, joining to give a performance, slipped in turn on and off the piano-stool during the *tutti*.

You see, I don't fear challenge on my own ground of theatre and film. I freely admit that until I looked at the programme I should have no notion whether a "King Lear" acted on tin step-ladders was Komsarjevsky's, Michel Saint-Denis's, or our own Tyrone Guthrie's bright idea. Suppose the curtain goes up on a back parlour fitted with a Welsh dresser, an elaborate overmantel, sagging arm-chairs, and prints of "Dignity and Impudence" and "Bolton Abbey." Can I say *for certain* whether the producer is Miss Irene Hentschel, Mr Lewis Casson, or Mr John Gielgud? No, of course I can't, and I admit I can't, and I

challenge anybody else to know. Nor should I be able to tell if the comedy's three acts were handled by each of the producers named in turn.

When it comes to films my defiance is uncompromising, unmistakable, and categorical. I suggest that no film critics would know who had directed a picture unless they were told, and that few remember after they have been told. In the matter of the private film-goer, I hold that the question of direction is an entirely closed book. Suppose we make an experiment or two. I give below a list of six of the most famous pictures that have ever been made : 1. *Intolerance* ; 2. *Kameradschaft* ; 3. *Battleship Potemkin* ; 4. *Storm Over Asia* ; 5. *Congress Dances* ; 6. *La Kernesse Héroïque*. Did you, reader, get the names of the directors right? You will find them at the end of this article. But that was easy, and meant to be. Now let us take a more difficult lot. Here are twelve well-known pictures : 1. *Pépé le Moko* ; 2. *Waxworks* ; 3. *Warning Shadows* ; 4. *The Blue Angel* ; 5. *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* ; 6. *The Petrified Forest* ; 7. *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* ; 8. *Jezebel* ; 9. *Frou-Frou* ; 10. *The Confessions of a Nazi Spy* ; 11. *City Streets* ; 12. *The White Hell of Pitz Palu*. And here, all jumbled up, are the names of the directors. Can you fit them?—William Wyler, Pabst, Leni, Le Roy, Duvivier, Lubitsch, Reuben Mamoulian, Litvak, Robison, Richard Thorpe, Von Sternberg, Archie Mayo.

Again, reader, you will find the names at the end of this article, but this time in their correct order. And what am I going to do if some private film-goer or professional critic lays his or her hand on his or her heart and swears to have got the whole lot right without any mistake? Grovel, reader, grovel! Now, let me not be misunderstood. My original statement was not that the direction of films is unimportant, though even here I think the tendency is to magnify that importance. Does anybody really think that Pudovkin would have made a mess of *Battleship Potemkin*, or that *Storm Over Asia*, directed by Eisenstein, would have been a flop? No, of course nobody thinks so. Give me a good enough story and enough money and I will undertake to produce *Battlecruiser Pudovkin* in a manner so unmistakably near-Eastern that our high-brow critics will start counting the port-holes in Russian!

The truth of the matter, of course, is that it is easy enough to direct good material; the trouble only starts with the bad. My heart went out the other evening to whoever undertook the fearful responsibility of getting an entertaining evening out of *Irene*. I suppose the only thing to do was to tell the story clearly and get it over to the kind of

film-goer that kind of story pleases. *Irene* is, I take it, a woman's picture. I suppose that being the belle of the ball is the feminine equivalent to what in a young man would be making a century in his first appearance for his county. What does a young man get out of a dance? Well, a lot of healthy exercise, a pretty girl or two to put his arm round, a good supper—a good lark, in a word. Does he retire to the cloakroom to re-comb his hair? He ought to be smacked if he does. One agrees that a young man who wanted to be the beau of the ball would deserve kicking into the next parish. How about being the beau of a cricket match? His companions would, I think, boot him out of the ground for six. The point is the essential difference between the sexes. No man cares how he looks, within reason; no woman cares for anything else, with or without reason. When a man goes to buy a hat he says to himself: Do I look a fool in this? If he does, he doesn't buy it. A woman has no such compunctions. The other evening at a well-known restaurant I saw a hat which screamed for attention. It was white, and looked like a wedding-cake surmounted by a model of the steeple of the church next to Queen's Hall. Presently, looking to see who could be wearing this monstrosity, I beheld a silly, inane, and meaningless little face whose silliness, inanity, and meaninglessness would have passed unnoticed if its owner had never passed that hat shop. But the young woman was satisfied; *we had seen her hat*.

There is a tragedy in *Irene*. This concerns a dress called Flaming Rosebud, or some such name. It is made out of what looks like mouse-coloured tulle, or do I mean chiffon? Waltzing around in it, somebody brings it into conflict with a dish of stew, with the result that a good dinner is thrown away. However, the catastrophe leads to the Alice Blue Gown, and subsequently to the one tune which this musical comedy appears to possess. For whenever I listened, the sound-track appeared to be reeling off Weber's old "Invitation to the Waltz." Miss Neagle flaunts and flounces in the manner prescribed for this kind of film, which is admirably directed by . . . Readers can fill in the name.

#### KEY

Six films: directed by Griffith, Pabst, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Pommer, Feyder.

Twelve films: 1. Duvivier; 2. Leni; 3. Robison; 4. Von Sternberg; 5. Le Roy; 6. Archie Mayo; 7. Lubitsch; 8. William Wyler; 9. Richard Thorpe; 10. Litvak; 11. Reuben Mamoulian; 12. Pabst.

## 73. *It Didn't Dizzy Me!*

March 19, 1941.

I ADMIT THERE WERE DIFFICULTIES about *The Prime Minister* (Warner), the chief one being to avoid presenting Dizzy as an astute old fox half a field ahead of the European pack. That was the Arliss "line." Then, of course, we couldn't be fobbed off with yet another version of Housman's bereaved statesman wooing his bereaved and Royal mistress.

Yet there was a way for an entirely new film, one which would have shown Disraeli as a world figure with a genius for home affairs. Indeed, there came a moment when the script writer put his finger on this new film and then abandoned it. There were shots of newspaper headings announcing the passing of this and that bill to amend this domestic evil and reform that abuse. Then why not have shown us the evils and abuses in their full spate and swing?

Consider the state of the London seamstress when Disraeli first went into politics :

There are not less than fifteen thousand seamstresses in London ; and during the season their working hours are anything from fifteen to eighteen hours a day ; the result is, that these young girls, sometimes scarcely more than children, never have more than six, frequently not more than three or four, and often only two hours out of the twenty-four in which to rest, sleep, and eat. It is not unusual, indeed, for these girls not to undress for nine consecutive days and nights, during which time they throw themselves "for a moment or two upon a mattress, and are given food, ready cut up in order to require the least possible time for swallowing." Incurable blindness and tuberculosis are often the fate of these girls. . . .

And here is a picture of a seamstress's end :

Upstairs on the floor of a windowless room at 3 Lion Court, Bermondsey, lies a thin huddled drift of feathers, so thin and dirty that it might be a cobweb. It does not cover the body of Ann Galway, aged forty-five, who is lying dead beside the starved but living body of her nineteen-year-old son. In this room there is not one stick that had once been part of a table, a chair, a bedstead. There is no cup, no knife, no plate, no utensil of any sort. It is a room for the dead

who have no necessities. There is only the small drift of feathers, scattered over this ghost of a ghost, lying dead beside the living ghost of her nineteen-year-old son. No coverlet, no sheet, hides her nakedness, but the feathers have stuck so fast she must be plucked like a fowl before the cause of death can be known and proclaimed at the inquest—hunger and cold.

Does anybody say that this sort of thing would not have made a picture? My retort is: Tell that to Eisenstein. I can imagine nothing more striking than the oriental dandyism of the statesman fop displayed against the double background of Victorian comfort and Victorian squalor.

Even the lifelong antagonism between Disraeli and Gladstone is lacking in finesse and, above all, in wit. We look in vain for the pictorial equivalent of such a passage as this:

Consider Mr Gladstone, at five o'clock on the day of his marriage, reading the Bible with his wife; contemplate Mr and Mrs Gladstone engaging a cook only after they had had a long conversation with her on religious matters. And then think of that aged but ever-brilliant firefly Mr Disraeli dancing, when in old age, a Highland fling, clad in his nightshirt, with Mrs Disraeli, clad in her nightgown, because they had received the news that a stroke of good luck had befallen one of their friends.

And whom does the reader think I have been quoting? The answer is Miss Edith Sitwell; which brings me to my point, or rather points. Why does the British film industry so markedly eschew mind? Has it not realised that when it comes to mindlessness Hollywood will always have it beaten to a frazzle?

Why, again, do not our picture magnates seek advice? Why rely upon uneducated Yes-men? Why not ask, when a film about Disraeli is in contemplation, "who has written well about Disraeli's period? Will they ask Miss Sitwell, Mr Arthur Bryant, or Mr Philip Guedalla to lunch and a chat? No. Does it occur to them that a film critic might help? No. I cannot speak for the others, but my price for such a consultation is a taxi to Claridge's, lunch including a pint of Bollinger N.V., and a taxi back again. And what would I have done in return? (I may say that whatever I am given to eat and drink I repay ninefold.) I would have told my film hosts that a Miss Sitwell had written a book called "Victoria of England." I would have told them not to set a scene at Lady Blessington's unless there was something adequate to be acted in that setting. I would have advised them to leave alone such trivialities as velocipedes and shower baths. I would have reminded them that

Gladstone looked more like a burnt-out cagle than a dissatisfied Hoxton pawnbroker. I would have drawn attention to his nose. And I would have warned them that glamorous Miss Diana Wynyard would be as much like the very home-spun Mrs Disraeli as I am like Sardanapalus. Indeed, a great deal less like.

Mr Gielgud's Disraeli? This is a careful and competent portrait. But does it quite come up to Sir John Skelton's description in "Talk of Lothair" of "the potent wizard with his olive complexion, coal-black eyes, and the mighty dome of his forehead—no Christian temple, be sure"? Sir John tells us he would as soon have thought of sitting down at table with Hamlet, Lear, or the Wandering Jew. Whereas I would willingly dine with the charming actor who has charmingly pretended. But lunch is my point, not dinner. I feel that if I had lunched with those magnates I should have told them to make a film with more brains to it. Or, in their jargon, to think up something else.

## 74. *Seven Films to Live With*

*April 30, 1941.*

"LIST, LIST, OH, LIST," said the Ghost in "Hamlet," thereby signifying that in life he had been a great maker of lists. So am I. I have a passion for lists which is almost a mania. The world's twelve most successful *courtisanes*, the best hundred sagas by contemporary novelists, the six best-favoured dance-band conductors, the fifteen most incompetent British film directors. Yes, give me a pencil, a piece of paper, and a list to compile, and I will play for hours. I have the laundry mind.

Judge, then, of the delight with which I take up the challenge recently flung down by my gracious but exceedingly doughty colleague, Miss Lejeune. This was in connection with the best seven films with which to be snowbound for a whole winter. Her own selection was *Snow White*, *Un Carnet de Bal*, *Our Town*, *Stage Coach*, *The Long Voyage Home*, *Destry Rides Again*, *Le Roman d'un Tricheur*. And the article ended: "This horrid parlour game is now open to all."

Thus encouraged, I spent the rest of that Sunday making inquiries. A young high-brow with whom I was lunching rattled off without

pausing for memory or breath : Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia*, Otzep's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fritz Lang's *M*, Pabst's *Kameradschaft*, and the Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup*.

A man-about-town voted for *La Kermesse Héroïque*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *La Femme du Boulanger*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Pygmalion*, *Mr Deeds Goes to Town*. My house-boy, who was at one time a cinema attendant, chose *Lost Horizon*, *Dark Victory*, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, *Broadway Melody 1940*, *Seven Sinners*, *Ninotchka*, *Old Mother Riley*, *M.P.*

My criticisms are that my colleague's list is too recent. Can it be that the world's seven best, or most comfortable or escapist, films were all made yesterday ? For my young intellectual's list I have the greatest respect, except that it, like its compiler, seems to me to be dead from the neck downwards. While, on the whole, I prefer my house-boy to my man-about-town.

But the major trouble with all these lists seems to me to be that their scope is not wide enough. Here is my list, and if it does not attain a greater comprehensiveness, embracing more kinds of films each great in its way, I will eat as many yards of celluloid as Miss Lejeune may determine.

1. *Broken Blossoms*. Because of its resemblance to an Eastern poem I once read consisting of a single line :

Oh, these wistaria flowers.

Because of the ache and beauty Richard Barthelmess got into the performance of the Chinese boy. Because of Lillian Gish, and her close resemblance in those days to the pictures of the youthful Sarah Bernhardt. I can see her now, with her hair falling down the sides of her pinched, woebegone face, and all the expressiveness of that wistful countenance drawn from the eyes down the long suspense of the nose and coming to final meaning in the trembling mouth. (Yes, I quote myself.)

2. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. I remember that this was advertised as *Shakespeare in Music* ; *Wagner in Pictures* ; *Michael Angelo in Words*. The film may not have been all these. But, golly, it did contain the one and only Rudolph Valentino.

3. *The Gold Rush*. Leave out Charlie Chaplin ? Over my dead body !

4. *The Blue Angel*. Did we not go about hailing Jannings as one of the world's great actors ? Yes, of course we did. And were we wrong ?

I think not. Is there any film actor living to-day who is possessed of the sheer power of Jannings, who always in his massivity reminded me of Richter's handling of Wagner? Harry Baur comes to mind as a possible answer; there is no other.

And Dietrich? Of Réjane the late C. E. Montague wrote his famous: "Her genius was sex bejewelled with every invention of cunning and charm that in civilised history—perhaps long before—the instinct has forged for its armoury, so that you felt she was the last, up to date, of the line of Helen and Sappho and Queen Cleopatra and Mary Stuart, and all the women famous in history for womanishness. The craft which spoke in her voice and her eyes was the sum and perfection of what, in all but the most noble ages, most men have wished women to have instead of high intellect." Consider this in relation to La Dietrich. I, for one, should not hesitate to write: "She was, among film actresses, the first in the line of Helen and Sappho. . . ."

5. *Scarface*. To leave out the gangster film would be like omitting, say, Restoration comedy from one's list of the best in English drama. I shall always hold this film to be the most poignant of the gangster school, with Paul Muni's magnificent playing throughout and the unforgettable moment of George Raft's dying. As a rule "unforgettable" is the critical jargon for something the critic won't remember to-morrow. I have never forgotten the way Raft sinks down unable to speak but with exculpation in his eyes and the slow shake of his head.

6. *Pépé le Moko*. The French version with Jean Gabin. I have a real nostalgia for this film, and if I were to choose one picture to live with, this would be it. The moment when the fat man, seeking shelter behind the mechanical piano, accidentally sets it playing, is in my view the most dramatically effective thing the cinema has given us since Jannings's cock crow.

7. I hate to agree with anybody, but my vote here must go to *Un Carnet de Bal*.

At this point somebody may say: "Where are the British films in this list?" And echo, instead of answering "Where," replies correctly "List." Well, I'm listening. And when I hear, let alone see, a British film that I would include in the best seven hundred or so, I will apprise readers of the "Tatler" accordingly.

## 75. *Kipps and Not Kipps*

June 4, 1941.

I HAVE A PERFECT RECOLLECTION of the coming out of Wells's "Kipps." The date was 1905, and I read the entrancing tale over a solitary dinner in the French Restaurant at the newly opened Midland Hotel, Manchester. I had intended to spend the evening at the theatre, but any idea of that kind was quickly put aside by the compelling fascination of the new realism. Meredith and Hardy had finished, the decadent writers of the 'nineties had never begun, and Arnold Bennett was not to publish "The Old Wives' Tale" for another three years. And here was this new work as actual as one's knife and fork, the waiters, and the other diners. Being a bit of a critic even in those days, I reflected that here was a new master about to do for the novel that which, in the 'sixties, Tom Robertson had done for the drama. I finished the book before I went to bed.

The point of the novel is that to us reading it to-day it all happens yesterday; the great fault of *Kipps* (Gaumont) is that too much of it seems to be happening not in the early nineteen hundreds but in the 'eighties and 'nineties. Take that turn on the Folkestone bandstand in which the Aspidistras sing a duet in the rig-out of the 'seventies. This is a double mistake. As a serious performance the clothes are obviously wrong for 1905, while the notion of doing the thing as burlesque did not occur until much later, the idea that guying the Victorians is funny being the nineteen-thirty-ish discovery of Gate Theatres, Players' Clubs, Little Revues, and the like. I have a perfect recollection, too, of the clothes worn by the young Kippses of Manchester in 1905, and I say emphatically that they were not of the "Floradora" period as this film suggests. Much water had run under the sartorial bridges in the half-dozen years which had elapsed since Leslie Stuart's masterpiece. The ladies' costumes are, of course, overdone, though I have long ceased to expect anything else in films. Shop girls out for an evening walk at Folkestone as anywhere else in 1905 did not look as though they were going to be photographed by Mr Cecil Beaton. The Walsinghams *mère et fille* are overgowned and overhatted, as Pinero says of the

French governess in "His House in Order." The costumes of both ladies are brand new and suggest an ample income, whereas one knows their circumstances to be, not straitened, yet not entirely easy. They are without a servant at the moment, but their dresses spell Worth. Past mistresses at keeping up appearances, they should also, as Pater says in another connection, keep their fallen day about them. The mother should be the 1905 version of Mrs Micawber, while Helen Walsingham is Kate Nickleby under the influence of William Morris and Burne-Jones.

Michael Redgrave is not right for Kipps, being too tall and too spry. John Mills or John Carol would have been better choices, and if they had not been available, Mr Carol Reed, the director, would have done better to go to the nearest draper's, abduct a junior assistant and coach him. Edward Chapman would have been ideal twenty years ago. Mr Redgrave does well, but it is always an actor doing well in a part for which he is not suited. Helen Haye plays Mrs Walsingham like a duchess, and Diana Wynyard suggests that Helen is training to be the consort of a reigning monarch. There is an excellent performance of Shalford by Lloyd Pearson, and a superb one, albeit a trifle too "classy," of the egregious Chester Coote by Max Adrian. But the film is, nevertheless, stolen beyond reparation by Arthur Riscoe as Chitterlow. This is a magnificent essay in comic *bravura* and exactly right in tone. Chitterlow is the one character in the film who is alive *and alive in 1905*. Phyllis Calvert has been greatly praised for her Ann Pornick. She is certainly a charming little actress, though here again I find the performance too genteel—too much of to-day's neat-handed Phyllis and too little of the jaded little slavey of the superheated basement. I have left Miss Calvert to the last, because in her are summed up this film's merits and demerits. *Kipps* is not any kind of version of Wells's saga of faded gentility and dingy shop parlours. It is an entirely delightful bit of romanticism à la Hans Andersen.

*De gustibus*, of course. But the man who thinks that *The Letter* (Warner) is a bad film ought never to be allowed to enter a cinema again. The writing is taut and spare throughout, never a word too much or too little. The unravelling of Maugham's story is masterly, and the presentation by William Wyler is visual and cinematic. The film runs an hour and a half and the audience at the trade show—and it is a fairly hard-boiled audience—did not move a finger. Bette Davis gives a good performance as the erring wife, though it is not, in my opinion, as convincing as Gladys Cooper's, whose gifts of glib, shallow

insincerity stood her in wonderful stead in the acted play. I liked very much James Stephenson's lawyer ; this is an actor of whom we should see more. Herbert Marshall does all that shoulders bowed in grief can do, and perhaps the film's best moment is when Leslie realises that she must spend the rest of her life with a husband who has forgiven. "The horror of it, Iago ; oh, the horror of it !" as Desdemona so nearly said. There are other good performances, notably one by Sen Yung as the solicitor's clerk who possesses a sense of realism denied the Western mind. Of course the letter is worth all the dollars the wretched husband has got, and equally, of course, 20 per cent for the go-between is a reasonable rake-off ! But did Maugham really write : " Strange that a man can live ten years with a woman and not know the first thing about her !" I imagine that in the original the " not " was omitted.

## 76. *Mr Disney's "Fantasia"*

*July 23, 1941.*

MR DISNEY's *Fantasia* (New Gallery) is an adult picture. It asserts the right of the film to range itself with ballet as the transmogrifier of other men's ideas. It claims the full rights of interpretation, of translation from one medium to another. It is magnificent and trivial, inspiring and commonplace, exciting and tedious. It is at least an hour too long. It sets out to be an exposition of great music, and some music that is not so great, in terms of Mickey Mouse, Disney's aider and abetter being the conductor, Leopold Stokowski.

We start with Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D Minor." Here the picture is "abstract" in the best Picasso manner, and I find among my notes the words "liver attack," "hat shop," "tapeworm," "whales," "graveyard ghosts." In my view the film here fails completely ; one sits back, closes one's eyes and listens. In a word, one sits Bach. And then, with Tschaikowsky's "Nutcracker Suite" the "Carnaval des Animaux" à la Disney starts in earnest. This is entirely charming, and the gnome-like creatures of Mr Disney's fancy appear at their most captivating and disarming. "L'Apprenti Sorcier," by Paul Dukas, serves to show Mickey Mouse matched against a broomstick and getting the better of its vagaries. Yes, items two and three

will please the kiddies. The fourth item is Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps." This initial ebullition of the new musical jollity never was and never will be concert music, whatever the high-brow hordes of Chelsea and Bloomsbury may think and say. Stravinsky, knowing this, took good care to make the thing a ballet, in order that the teipsichorean pranks might excuse the musical pranks. Disney here turns the tables on those tamperers who will not let masterpieces alone. He invents a ballot of his own, showing the earth in its state of primal and pre-Miltonic existence. You might say a zoo without keepers. This is very fine, although much too long.

The fifth section, Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony," shows Disney at his abysmal worst. Femininity has always betrayed this artist who, in the matter of the "Ewig-Weibliche," never seems able to get away from the dumber kind of chorus girl. The idea behind the symphony is the flirtations between, and ultimate couplings of, centaurs and centalettes, the latter being conceived as a kind of chevaline ushcrettes. I found all this part of the picture quite embarrassingly *common*.

The sixth section, Ponchicelli's "Dance of the Hours," is again a huge mistake. The grotesque ostrich who pirouettes *à la* Pavlova, and her attendant *coryphées*, do something to suggest the white inanity, the blanched-almond vacuity of "Les Sylphides." But alas, recourse for the rest of the ballet is had to hippopotami, elephants, and their kind, and these do poor justice to the lively little tune at the end which cries aloud for Mills's Circus and white ponies with apricot plumes. In a word, the entire panache of this ballet is galumphingly lost.

Mr Disney makes good recovery with his transcription of Mous-sorgsky's "Night on the Bare Mountain." Here are brought together all the odd, incongruous parallels which, through success or failure, have from time to time suggested themselves—Blake, Gustave Doré, Rousseau the *douanier*, Obey, Goncourt—see the last page of "Manette Salomon"—and Cecil Beaton. In the end the film dissolves into Schubert's "Ave Maria," and frankly I did not care about Mr Disney's vindication of the Christian religion. He should have confined himself to the Book of Genesis.

I hope this film, whose colour is exquisite throughout, will do well. It is ambitious and finely so, and one feels that its vulgarities are at least unintentional. To help it to succeed I make one or two suggestions: 1. Shorten it by the better part of an hour; at present it runs two hours and twenty minutes. 2. Delete the *compère*, *conférencier*, *announcer*, or whatever he is called. His material is dull and redundant, and his

dress-suit is awful. 3. Do away with the interval. 4. Delete the lecture on the sound track. 5. Build up with a good news picture and a good gangster short.

The other films of the week are middling stuff. *Moon Over Burma* is a synthetic film made by coupling up Dorothy Lamour and Robert Preston with the moon and Burma. Do you want to see *Flame of New Orleans* at the Leicester Square Cinema? Do you want to see an actress, name of Marlene Dietrich, who, as long as she draws breath, will be our best portrayer of the modern gold-digger, playing something else? Do you want to see this flower of modern evil as a modest violet trotting round in a crinoline a hundred years ago? Then this film, which is produced by René Clair, will be all your fancy paints. Do you want to see how difficult it is to adopt a baby? *Penny Serenade* (Regal) is a tear compeller showing how Irene Dunne and Cary Grant lose first their own baby and then the one they adopt. Which, as Lady Bracknell would certainly have observed, looks like carelessness. The pair are about to divorce, when fortunately a third infant turns up and dares them to do their worst. Personally, I should prefer a film in which Irene and Cary, finding themselves handicapped by a brat, try to palm it off on to somebody else! *Rage in Heaven* is an admirable thriller in which Robert Montgomery, a paranoic, stages his suicide so that it shall look like a murder. *The Devil and Miss Jones* is a fairy-tale featuring that magnificent comedian Charles Coburn, who impersonates a millionaire shop owner pretending to be a detective in one of his own shops. This is a good film and highly recommended. Whether you like *Footsteps in the Dark* (Warner) depends entirely upon whether you like Errol Flynn. Personally, my passion for this actor stops this side of idolatry. A long way this side.

## 77. *A Forgotten Actress*

*July 30, 1941.*

WE WENT INTO OUR CLUB last night to get a pint o' beer. The Kiplingesque echo hath bewrayed us. We did nothing of the kind. We went into our club to find somebody older than ourselves. Some one old enough to remember Leslie\* Carter. The first person we

encountered was a critic of the national summer game, one whose eyes through too much scanning of the pitch, and looking at the rain through beakers of Lord's best bitter, have taken on the keen yet yonderly look of the African hunter. He said : " Carter ; knew him well. Slow left-hander with a fast one that came back. Thought of for England. Then one day Jessop gave him a pasting, and he was never the same bowler again." The second man we asked was a low comedian who is nearly as ancient as his jokes. He said : " Carter ? Yes, of course I remember Carter. Used to feed me in ' The Girl Round the Corner.' I remember at the Hippodrome, Bacup. . . ." But we had already passed on to our third antediluvian, a dramatic critic so venerable that in his presence even beardless boys think twice. " Did you say *Leslie Carter* ? " And after some ruminating the old walrus went on : " Yes, I remember Leslie. Leading man to Clara Morris. Came over here some time in the 'eighties. Too effeminate for English taste." The old gentleman spoke more truly than he knew. Leslie Carter was, of course, Mrs Leslie Carter, and effeminate in so far as she was wholly feminine—in fact, a heck of a gal whom David Belasco put over on the American public in lots of plays over lots of years. I never saw this actress, but seem to remember gathering from those who did that she was a ranting, roaring, splurgy, and generally highly efficient exponent of those society melodramas of which " *Zaza*," adapted for her by Belasco, is as good an example as any. The Carter seems to have been an extraordinary woman, and perhaps this is the place to say that she is the *Lady with Red Hair*, the new Warner film starring Miriam Hopkins.

The motive behind Carter when she went on the stage was none of those which normally lure young women from the everyday pursuits for which their lack of talent so worthily besets them. Carter was not moved by any love of the theatre ; with her it was not " act or bust." She cared nothing for tragedy, comedy, farce. She desired to shine as an actress simply that she might obtain notoriety, in the light of which it might be possible to re-demand the custody of the child of which the American divorce laws had deprived her. With which object she bearded the managerial lion of the day. She had no time to waste, she said, in which to learn her job, and therefore must start at the top. And it is our pleasure to think that at this point Belasco murmured something about putting the Carter before the horse. Anyhow the woman won, as women always will with people like Belasco who look " very fierce " on the outside, but inside can give Mr Jellyby points for meekness. And

so for a dozen years the Carter rampaged all over America, her *chevelure*, if the film is to be trusted, getting redder and redder. Unless, of course, the chemists were getting cleverer and cleverer.

Shall we for a moment delve into the archives, meaning certain musty scrap-books which have accompanied us throughout our equally musty career? In them we find a criticism of the Carter written after the production of "Zaza" in New York in 1899.

After the third act of "Zaza," which blew into the Garrick last night with a burst of scarlet trumpets, David Belasco made a speech. He reminded the audience, with tears in his larynx, that nine years ago a most unhappy woman flung herself at his feet and asked his "advice." She got it. Mr Belasco then said: "There is one perfectly happy woman in the world to-night." That woman had reached the goal of every actor's ambition; the approval of a New York audience. "She will, before she retires, send a telegram to a certain red-headed boy, telling him that you like her, and he will then know that he has no reason to be ashamed of his mother." Bravo, Mr Belasco. Did not every woman's heart thrill with yours and Mrs Carter's when it remembered that, through plot and counterplot, through the divorce court and the awful verdict of the judge on the mother's relation to her child her maternal heart beat fondly for her offspring in this crowning hour of triumph? Does anybody believe that David Belasco was born yesterday?

The author, one Norman Hapgood, says of this player:

A certain power she has—the power of limitless energy directed by a master of the trade—but never for a moment does she suggest those finer shades, those softer touches, that can be truly given from an inner well of genuine feeling, of instinctive re-creation of the emotions portrayed. You might as well engage Corot to teach a Philistine how to represent the poetry of morning. Mrs Carter is a good actress, as actresses go, and we have no desire to disown it, but she is as hard as an arc light and as lacking in exquisiteness as a turnip.

Well, this is the story La Hopkins has to suggest, and I don't feel that she is a sufficiently good actress to impersonate one who was, in Mr Shaw's words, "a melodramatic heroine of no mean powers." Mr Shaw went on to say that Mrs Carter's "dresses and graces and poses cast a glamour of American high art on Mr Belasco's romance, and her transports and tornadoes, in which she shows plenty of professional temperament and susceptibility, give intensity to the curtain situations." This film has been brilliantly cut so as to give us no opportunity whatever of seeing the Hopkins perform any of those "transports and tornadoes." Always with the exception of two minutes when, at the end of some play, the Hopkins shows herself to be a strictly middling actress,

extremely unlikely to take New York by storm. Claude Rains gives an excellent performance as Belasco, and once again one regrets that Nature, which endows so many mindless young brutes with the figures of Greek gods, should have vouchsafed the most grudging of torsos to this mature and otherwise finely endowed player.

## 78. "Citizen Kane"

October 22, 1941.

ONE OF THE DISADVANTAGES of all kinds of criticism, including that of the film, is that the better it is, the greater the probability that it will lead you up the garden. I practically never read the film criticisms in the "Observer" and the "Sunday Times" until after I have seen the films for myself, the reason being that our Sunday writers are good critics who criticise and not bad critics who merely report. And then, when I do read my colleagues I find that one of two things happens. Either I like a film which they haven't liked, meaning that I see something in it that they missed. This gives me a feeling of superiority that I know to be unjustified. Or they have enormously liked something that I find dull. Which is humiliating.

Last week I yielded to temptation in the matter of *Citizen Kane*. Miss Lejeune wrote that this picture was "Probably the most exciting film that has come out of Hollywood for twenty-five years. I am not at all sure that it isn't the most exciting film that ever came out of anywhere." Miss Powell called *Citizen Kane* one of the most remarkable films of this and many a year, talked of Charles Foster Kane as a "colossus of a man," and added, "This is an adult film, technically and psychologically adult, recognising the ultimate obscurity in which every human life moves; one of the few, the very few films to present not an abstraction, but a man." Now imagine my horror, which includes self-distrust, at seeing no more in this film than the well-intentioned, muddled, amateurish thing one expects from high-brows. (Mr Orson Welles's height of brow is enormous.) As for Kane, I could see nothing of Miss Powell's "colossus," perhaps because my brilliant colleague's views as to what constitutes a colossus are not mine. My colleague will agree that to be the owner of a chain of drug stores ten thousand links long,

with each link represented by a city and the whole stretching from Hollywood to San Francisco, does not make a man a colossus. I see no difference when the drug stores are newspapers having the greatest circulation in the solar system. It depends what he does with them, and Kane did nothing with his newspapers except increase the vulgarity of an already vulgar world.

There was a point when I thought the film was going to mean something. This was when it showed Kane as a *commencement* colossus pitting the sincerity and honesty of his little paper, the "Inquirer," against the dishonest might of the wholly commercial Press. It is true that the chivalry here was more apparent than actual, since Kane's private fortune was big enough to permit the paper to lose a million dollars a year and keep running for sixty years. And then Kane became like his rival newspaper proprietors, only more so. Here, then, was the problem which I hoped the picture was going to solve: what brought a man shaping for greatness to the splurgy, self-advertising littleness of your bogus Great Man? But it seemed that Mr Welles had other fish to fry. Cutting the knot of my little problem by making Kane take over the vulgarian staff of a vulgarian and rival paper, which staff ran things, including Kane, their way—I wonder what would have happened to a lot of sub-editors, reporters, critics, and other rubbish who tried to run a real colossus like the late C. P. Scott, and mould the "Manchester Guardian" to their views in opposition to his!—hastily cutting my little knot, Mr Welles let himself go on the great mystery of "Rosebud."

"Rosebud" was the last word uttered by Kane on his death-bed, and the picture showed us all the Kaneites setting out to discover what the dying man had meant. Was Rosebud an early sweetheart, a late mistress, or even a slow race-horse? The film suggested that if we could discover the significance behind the word we should have the clue to the enigma of Kane's grandiosity. Personally, apart from the hastily shelved problem alluded to above, I found no need for any explanation. I take Kane to be only one more example of the man whose mind is too vulgar to support the shock of unlimited power and riches, and as such about as enigmatic as a pikestaff. Anyhow, the chase was on, and, to be fair, a lot of it was fun, both visual and aural.

In the end the film spilled the beans. Rosebud was the name of the sledge taken away from young Kane when he was sent to school in the great world; which deprivation became a Freudian complex accountable for Kane's mania for acquiring things, pleasure domes like Kubla Khan's, statues without heads, operatic wives without voices. And then

I remembered what I had forgotten—that early symbolic shot showing a sledge covered with a pall of snow and hinting at a coffin. Now a low-brow director would never have let me forget this. Nor, I think, would he have bothered with Mr Welles's mystery. Instead, he would have engaged Edward G. Robinson to play Kane, and carried on with a straightforward story of cheapening greatness, punctuating it every twenty minutes or so with a vision of dear little Rosebud and a dear little boy parking his dear little person on it. And that, my long-suffering readers, in my poor view, would have been the right way.

I thought the photography quite good, but nothing to write to Moscow about, the acting middling, and the whole thing a little dull. What about the "message" of the picture? But surely the notion that vulgar minds express themselves in terms of triviality is merely belated Balzac. Does this mean that the film is catching up? Well, better belated than never. It was possibly the belated which elated my colleagues. They are not of Balzac's day; I am. Whoever has lived with Nucingen will find Kane very small beer.

Unless . . . Here a belated but swagger thought strikes me. Was Mr Welles out to show a vulgarian not wholly vulgar, but possessed of enough mind to realise his own tragedy? Then why not get hold of a director sufficiently low-browed to put this over? Mr Welles's high-brow direction is of that super-clever order which prevents you from seeing what that which is being directed is all about.

## 79. *More About "Citizen Kane"*

November 5, 1941.

"CITIZEN KANE" HAS ENTIRELY OUSTED THE WAR as conversation fodder. Waiters ask me what I think of it, and the post is full of it. A letter from Thame says: "Kane believes that he has lost the love of his mother. And his inordinate love of possessions is part of his vain, ceaseless attempt to recapture that sense of primary emotional security which he lost, when he was abruptly torn away from his happy, mother-protected childhood (represented by the sledge sequence in the early part of the film) and was handed over to the efficient, but essentially unloving, care of bankers. Kane's public career—the policy of his

newspaper and his political platform—is really his attempted revenge on the men who separated him from his mother. And Kane is told, once or twice in the film, that he wants every one to love him. Moreover, he is bitterly disappointed when his second wife shows her lack of love for him by walking out of his Gargantuan home. It is at the end of his revengeful, berserk smashing-up of his wife's bedroom that he significantly mutters 'Rosebud.' " Another letter, from Paddington, has this passage : " It is understandable why to English film-goers the object thrown on the fire at the end is not recognisable. To most Americans, however, it would be obvious, and being an American myself, I can understand why. This is simply because sleds (American spelling), along with other means of childhood locomotion, are youth's most prized possession and rarely forgotten. One of the peculiarities (I use this word in deference to the probable English viewpoint) about American sleds is that they all have a name and are suitably decorated. As a personal instance, I can without any difficulty quite easily remember the name of my own. It was 'Firefly.' " From which it would seem that the sleds have it.

One evening at the Café Royal I fell in with a brow whose height exceeded the combined altitude of all the foreheads of our Sunday critics put together. He said he had seen *Citizen Kane* twice ; that he did not believe that the thing burnt at the end was a sledge ; that he refused to believe that the thing was a sledge ; that Orson Welles didn't want people to think it was a sledge ; that the point of Welles's film was not possessiveness and how come, but the obscurity of the motives animating the human mind. I said that the great dramatists don't tie themselves up in a muddle and then ask the spectator to read some abstruse moral into it. Ibsen leaves us in no doubt at the end of *A Doll's House* that it is Nora who slams the door, and not the wind. Shakespeare tells us that it is Cordelia's body, and not some other wench's, that Lear is carrying. The Giant High-brow said : " How about Hamlet ? Isn't the spectator in doubt as to whether that young man is mad or not ? " Midnight, with the waiters clearing away, is a difficult time to answer what was always a poser. But I remembered Walkley, and was able to trot out his " Commentators who find Hamlet mad in one place and sane in another invariably attribute the inconsistency to Hamlet himself instead of to Shakespeare, who may have found it convenient to have Hamlet alternately mad and sane. " At this point they bundled us out of the café and I found that somebody, not me, had been buying and paying for champagne. In the darkness

outside, the argument was continued. "I suppose," I said, "that if Welles were to film 'The School for Scandal' he would so photograph the screen scene that the spectators would leave the cinema uncertain whether the person concealed behind the screen had been Lady Teazle or the little French milliner after all." And then out of the dark a voice spake. It was still the voice of my high-brow, and in the darkness it sounded cavernous. "The Orson Welles film," it said, "is the Film of the Future. Hitherto the film has been explicit. Orson Welles has decided that in future it shall be implicit. *Citizen Kane* is the Gateway to Implicithood." And so saying, the voice vanished.

Well, dear readers, that's that. You know now that all the vulgar beef, beer, and tobacco barons are vulgar because when they were about seven years of age somebody came and took away their skates. That is one explanation of this alleged world-shaking masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*. Another point of view is that *Citizen Kane* is so great a masterpiece that it doesn't need explaining. In fact, that it won't brook explanation. It is just one marvellous Doorway to Implicitude, or whatever was the phrase used by my altitudinous friend. I strongly suspect that implicithood, or implicitude, will turn out to look like the interior of Mr Welles's personal and private cranium. In the meantime I continue to steer a middle course. I regard *Citizen Kane* as a quite good film which tries to run the psychological essay in harness with your detective thriller, and doesn't quite succeed.

## 80. "La Bête Humaine"

December 24, 1941.

I AM PAINFULLY SITY. In comparison with the modest violet who indites this column, the dramatic critic of this paper is a trumpet orchid, and D. B. Wyndham-Lewis the gaudiest of Mr Browning's melon flowers. Being the soul of modesty I never boast, and the notion of a scoop is repugnant to me. Yet I cannot refrain from recalling my one and only journalistic scoop and making a boast of it here and now. The way of it was this: M. Jean Gabin and Mlle Simone Simon came over to this country in connection with a film which had been made from Zola's "La Bête Humaine" and showing at the little Academy

Theatre. A party was given to meet them. You know the kind of thing. A small room in an expensive hotel, and the guests of honour in the centre of what looks like a Rugby scrum entirely composed of journalists. For a long time I hovered on the edge of the crowd ; the party began at three o'clock and it was not until six that I got a word with Gabin. To him I said : " Monsieur Gabin, I am going to ask you a question that you must have answered a hundred times to-day. Can you really drive a railway engine ? " Gabin replied : " Nobody asks me that question, and I drive her very well." We then went into details, and this fine actor told me that prior to making this film he had put in six months' hard work in a railway yard, at the end of which time he had obtained his driver's certificate. He added that he was a member of the Engine-drivers' Union, and had driven the Marseilles to Paris express. Next day I printed the interview under the heading : " The News the Others Missed." I was immensely proud of that scoop, and am still proud of it.

The audience at the London Pavilion did not quite know what to make of *Judas Was a Woman*, the ridiculous new name under which this film must now labour. Among them were a great number of men serving in the Forces, and their sweethearts. Watching the film and listening to the titters, one realised how enormously Hollywood has misled the youth of to-day on the one matter on which it is supposed to be an authority—passion. It is fair to say that the modern boy and girl obtain their notion of passion not from the theatre, since they have no use for " Romeo and Juliet " except in Hollywood travesty ; nor from the opera, since Miss Jeanette Macdonald has not yet seen herself in the part of Isolda ; nor from the masterpieces of literature, for to them Tess would be a bore while Miss Blandish is no end of fun. Passion to the young film-goer is a decorous arrangement of lips and arms, a pattern in lipstick and diamond bracelets, the ever-familiar surrender of that wilting flower Lana Glue to the manly and persistent ardour of that equally popular favourite Dwight Gloy ; which spectacle is, of course, as much like the real thing as the noise emanating from a crooner is like singing, or the filth discoursed by a dance-band resembles music. Zola's love-making belongs to another school. It is something of which one is a little ashamed. Is it possible that a pair of lovers should be other than the overgrown babies of the Hollywood screen, that lying in each other's arms they should babble of murder ? The lovers in this case, as the reader will remember, are an engine-driver and the wife of his *chef de gare*, well and truly, as Mr Wyndham Lewis would permit me

to say, *cocufié*. But the station-master is more jealous even than most of his kind, and in his rage has already murdered a scoundrel who was his wife's lover before his marriage to her. We saw the murder, and we remember how the wife was forced to behold it. And it is this murder which she must now describe to her lover. It has become a question of getting rid of the husband, but the lover happens to suffer from epilepsy, and can only rise to the heights of assassination during an attack. Presently an attack comes on, but, unfortunately for the wretched wife, it is she, not her husband, who is the victim of momentary madness. The husband returns to find his wife stabbed to death. He stands in the doorway with his back to the audience and whimpers, thus exhibiting the unusual spectacle of a *chef de gare* who is a figure of tragedy instead of fun. No wonder the audience tittered at something so essentially unHollywood.

The presentation of this magnificent film was almost entirely spoilt on the evening I attended by the quite monstrous sound amplification. This was all very well in the scenes which happened in the cab of the engine and in the railway station at Le Havre, where the excess of din was an adjunct to realism. But that was surely no reason why everywhere else our ears should be so violently assaulted, the characters roaring and bellowing like sea lions, and the incidental music attaining a volume of sound which could only be described as ear-splitting. The complaints in my neighbourhood were outspoken and general. It would be useless for anybody to tell me that all this noise was unavoidable ; it was successfully avoided at the little Academy Theatre. My brain was so concussed that it was some considerable time before I could give the admirable performances of Gabin and Simon their proper due. There was one charming interlude when the battery of our ears momentarily ceased. This was the scene of the railwaymen's ball, a piece of mob characterisation which the French do so brilliantly. Here were perfectly reproduced in comparative quiet the manners of a provincial town, of railwaymen dressed up for an evening's gaiety, and of a conductor who could have been nobody except a railwayman conducting an orchestra of platelayers from the P.L.M. All this part was sheer delight ; the rest was deafening torment.

## 81. *Bravo, Mr Sturges!*

January 14, 1942.

EVERYBODY KNOWS what a fatal thing it is to say to Jones: "I want you to meet Smith. You will like him enormously." The invariable result is that Jones hates Smith before he knows whether he is short or tall, dark or fair, a good sort or a twerp. The programme of *Sullivan's Travels* (Plaza) containing the words, "A picture that will never be forgotten," I settled into my seat firmly determined to forget it. Then the extraordinary thing happened. I found myself realising that here was a film which I should certainly remember. Let me say here and now that the director is Preston Sturges. What other films Mr Sturges has directed I do not know, for the reason that I have never in my life remembered who produced what in the theatre or who directed what in the cinema.

I have a notion that Komisarjevsky once produced Tchekhov's *Three Sisters* at Barnes. I think it possible that D. W. Griffith was responsible for *The Birth of a Nation*, and I seem to recollect René Clair in connection with cock-eyed houses, and Lubitsch having to do with a young woman obviously from Muswell Hill standing up in a victoria and yodelling her way through old Vienna. There my knowledge and my interest end. I do not want to know the name of the chef who has cooked my dinner, and equally I am not curious about who has prepared the entertainment that follows. Is it possible that in this respect I am like the woman reader who has no notion of the name of the author whose sentimental twaddle is absorbing her? It is my view that whoever enters a cinema at once descends to the status of the average woman reader. And I shall prove from the end of this film that Mr Sturges rates the intelligence of the average film-goer even lower.

*Sullivan's Travels* moves as a brilliant fantasy in two keys—slapstick farce and the tragedy of human misery. Most tragi-comedies fail because the author is in two minds; he is betrayed into joking when he should be serious and he lets seriousness impinge upon his lighter mood. The theory is that he laughs to prevent himself crying; in practice he sets us crying because he is not ready with the next lot of jokes.

"The genre requires a great master, and I may say at once that in this

film Mr Sturges has not attempted tragi-comedy. He tells a story which moves on two planes, keeps each plane separate, and handles the transition from one to the other with incredible deftness. He knows at any moment exactly where he stands emotionally, and so do we. It is only at the end of the picture that we realise that the sum of his two planes added together is perfect irony. The beginning shows how Sullivan, the popular director of films entitled *Ants in the Pants* and the like, decides to turn high-brow and contemplates a piece of pretentious bosh called *Brother, Where Art Thou?* In order to do this he gets himself up as a tramp and proceeds to see life as it is lived in the underworld. All this part of the film is extremely witty, not only verbally, but also cinematically.

Sullivan's first adventure is to pick up one of Hollywood's blonde failures, if that can be called a failure which has never started. Yes, the little blonde has seen some of Sullivan's successful films, including one in which the hero fell through the floor into a stable and sneezed at a horse which, taking umbrage, sneezed back. "Don't you think," says Sullivan, "that while Europe is devastated by war, with Death on the prowl everywhere, a film director can be better employed than in making films of this sort?" "No," replies this disconcerting blonde. But then, her notion of seriousness is bound up with the recollection of a friend who shot himself, with the result that the room had to be re-papered. They are travelling in Sullivan's own car, which leads to his arrest for stealing his own property. "Realise this," says Sullivan, "whatever happens, the cops can't do anything." The next shot shows Sullivan and the blonde behind prison bars, and real prison bars; no nonsense à la Orson Welles about symbolising the imprisonment of the human soul! At this point the film changes planes. My readers are asked to believe that the picture has nothing to do with flying.

Sullivan's travels now take him into the world of the doss-house and the chain gang; he loses his identity, and is sentenced to six years' hard labour. All this part of the film is extremely moving; the play-goer will understand when I say it is as though Mr Sturges had combined Gogol's "Government Inspector" with Gorki's "Lower Depths." In the world above, Sullivan is now supposed to have been run over by a train and killed; and there is an admirably witty shot lasting not more than three seconds in which his presumed widow, who loathed him, is seen arranging flowers on his grave, with infinite distaste. It would perhaps be a mistake to tell readers how Sullivan, lost to the world, escapes from his state of inhuman bondage. Sufficient to say

that Mr Sturges shows with delightful cynicism that extenuating circumstances are forthcoming when a man sentenced to six years' hard labour for slugging another man with a piece of rock turns out to be a popular Hollywood director.

I have now to make good what I said earlier on about Mr Sturges's valuation of the intellectual standing of the average cinema-goer. It seems that the chain-gang master, despite his brutality, has some of the bowels of compassion. Enough at least to allow him to provide the convicts with an occasional cinema show where the early cartoons of Walt Disney permit them for a moment to forget their misery. Returned to the upper world, Sullivan refuses to produce *Brother*, *Where Art Thou?* Why? Because in the mind's eye he sees his fellow-prisoners laughing. The vision fades, and he sees the average cinema audience laughing. Presently the two pictures merge. Had Mr Welles made this film we should here assume that in his view humanity wears as many shackles as a chain gang. I prefer to believe that in Mr Sturges's view the average cinema-goer is possessed of convict mentality. The two principal parts are beautifully sustained by Joel McCrea and Veronica Lake. And the photography is brilliant throughout.

## · 82. *In Praise of Mickey Rooney*

April 29, 1942.

WHAT IS THE REASON for the extraordinary Rooney resistance of which I have been conscious for some time? Or, as we should say over here, this dead-set against Mickey not by the public, which to see him in *Babes on Broadway* filled the Empire to overflowing five times on Tuesday last, but on the part of the high-brow critics? Of this young man's technical accomplishments there can be no doubt. His sense of humour is generally conceded. His overpowering pathos in *Boys' Town* and half-a-dozen other films must be obvious to anybody who is not blind, deaf, and dumb in the worst sense. He sings enough to eke out Miss Judy Garland whenever the director mistakenly thinks that young lady requires eking out. He plays the banjo with a virtuosity this country knows nothing about. He is a poor mimic, and his efforts in the present film to impersonate Carolean Miranda, Sir Harry Lauder,

and Richard Mansfield merely show a greedy director anxious to get out of a super-willing horse rather more than it can give. Yet there is no doubt to my mind that within strict limits Mickey is a great actor. He can keep still. He can listen. He can let you know what is going on in his mind without pulling faces. He has geniality. Nature and not the sound-director has put the tears into his voice. And he has the one quality by which all great actors are known, that you can't keep your eyes off him. Is he pocket size? Then this snub-nosed little tough is a great actor in miniature.

When on Sunday last I looked in our two major papers for corroboration of this undoubted genius—to say that he has only talent just won't do—I found both our mistresses aloof, and if I may say so without disrespect, sniffy. I read Miss Lejeune and I found: "As for Master Rooney, he specifically states that there is more to life than just a song, a dance, and an encore, although I saw little evidence of it in this picture." I am afraid this revered critic cannot have been attending. The whole point of the film is that Mickey puts the Broadway crown aside at the instigation of his better nature. *This happens three times.* Miss Dilys Powell, whose critical armory is my constant envy, wrote: "It may be argued that Mr Rooney, with his extraordinary (though to me not pleasing) talents, has for some years now had nothing to learn, except, perhaps, reticence." Is it possible that my colleague's pen was not attending? And that what displeases its owner is not the actor's talents but his personality? To affirm that extraordinary talent can be displeasing is like denying the quality of an Irving because he drags a leg, the voice of a Tauber because you do not like his brand of smile, the clowning of a Grock because you don't like a bald head. I hasten to say that Miss Powell's slip—if it was a slip as I firmly believe—occurred in the middle of a brilliant, and sensible, argument that budding comedians in the course of a film should be shown budding and not allowed to start in full bloom.

I now come to the statement that Mr Rooney has no reticence; which I deny. He has reticence when it is called for, and in marked distinction to our too numerous stage and screen actors who show only reticence when everything else is called for. Let me couple with this a sentence I received the other day in answer to a statement of mine that Rooney was one of the six best screen actors in the world. "I cannot understand this," wrote my correspondent; "Rooney is the distillation of everything that is characteristic of the uncultured American boy." I confess that this sort of criticism makes me see red. What else were

Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn? And what is wrong in the accurate and truthful presentation in an American film—and all Hollywood films are addressed in the first place to the American audience—what is wrong in the sincere presentation to Americans of the young life-blood of their nation?

Here I want to make a point which in my view has not been sufficiently considered by our high priestesses of the fine shades. This is Rooney's power to exuberate. And to exuberate is woefully lacking in the acting world to-day. Here is Quintessential Boy, and perhaps the reader will care to look with me again at something G. K. Chesterton wrote on the subject:

The scene in which Trabb's boy continually overtakes Pip in order to reel and stagger as at a first encounter is a thing quite within the real competence of such a character; it might have been suggested by Thackeray, or George Eliot, or any realist. But the point with Dickens is that there is a rush in the boy's rushings; the writer and the reader rush with him. They start with him, they share an inexpressible vitality in the air which emanates from this violent and capering satirist. Trabb's boy is, among other things, a boy; he has a physical rapture in hurling himself like a boomerang and in bouncing to the sky like a ball.

I take it that it is the *bounce* of Trabb's boy which offends my colleagues who appear to feel as the Misses Lavinia and Clarissa Spenlow might have felt if this amazing human combustion engine had come bouncing and boomeranging into their decorous bird-cage existence. In the present film Mr Rooney exuberates more than I have ever seen him exuberate; he exudes more energy, more magnetism, more *life* than all the other characters in the film put together. But he should never impersonate.

Miss Judy Garland puts up a highly efficient performance in support and, oddly enough, her imitation of Sarah Bernhardt does not entirely fail if only because somebody has told her about that stop in the great actress's voice which was half strangled dove and half mating tigress. The cutter should have been busy in other parts of the film also. There is a dreadful scene in which some pallid little English evacuees are set against the flower of young American film talent; and I resent a song exhorting Tommy Atkins to keep his chin up. This is an example of Hollywood patronage at its least bearable, and if I can sense the temper of an audience, that at the Empire resented it strongly. Give me ten minutes with the scissors and I will make *Babes on Broadway* into a little masterpiece of its kind.

## 83. *A Great Russian Film*

February 10, 1943.

LET IT BE LAID DOWN CLEARLY and distinctly, without any iff-ing and aff-ing, as we used to say up North, that *One Day of War*, the Russian film, now showing at the Regal, is by streets, miles, and any other unit of measure you can think of, the best documentary ever made. The day chosen to be "shot" by the hundred and sixty Russian photographers was Russia's three hundred and fifty-sixth day of war. The film is largely concerned with the relief of Leningrad, though it also shows us what was happening on that day on the entire Russian front, from the frozen North to the unthawed South. It is a monument to the courage, devotion, steadfastness, cheerfulness, and self-sacrifice of the Russian people. This film has enormous dignity. It has this because it is Russian.

*One Day of War* welds together, as I have seen no other documentary achieve, the fighters at the front and the workers behind the line. It gives individual photographs of these workers and their record in figures. This steelworker, for example, has an output of 230 per cent as against pre-war 100 per cent. This group of coal miners has reached the astonishing figure of 500 per cent; for the Russian prefers plain figures to the haze and nebulosity of fine phrases. Then we see a woman bringing back to the safety of an improvised trench a soldier lying wounded in the open—the kind of thing which, in this country, wins the Victoria Cross. And we are told that she has already accomplished this feat *one hundred and sixty times*, and that this is her one hundred and sixty-first rescue. We see her bringing in the man's rifle, and we are told that in no case has she omitted to do this. In other words, the Russians are shown carrying on the greatest war in history without fuss. Needless to say that, the film being Russian, there is artistry and to spare. What could be better than that old clock ticking away against the wall which a German shell has just set on fire? Or the visit to the front by the opera singer who stands on an improvised platform, sings a touching folk-song, is applauded and thanked, and departs as she came in the tiniest staff car I have ever seen? Or the recital by the concert pianist? Were this an English film the fellow would be drooling away

at that infernal Liebestraum or other sentimental horror. Being Russian, he plays Rachmaninoff ; and although it is the Second Concerto, it is not the sensuous slow movement we hear but that rat-tat, super-martial, give-better-than-you-take finale. And the music is in conformity with the Russian fighting spirit. There is a scene in which a dead airman is taken out of his crashed and burning plane. He is buried, and a youth of no particular instruction, leader perhaps of the little group, says a few words at the graveside. He is not tongue-tied as an Englishman would be ; nor does he stutter. He says what he has to say simply and directly ; in other words, with Russian dignity.

On the spectacular side the film is magnificent. The tanks seem to be moving, not in the world of to-day, but in the large-scale sphere of D. W. Griffith. They call up strange images of juggernauts and prehistoric monsters, and the mind likens them to the Hamilcar's elephants in "*Salammbo*." There is a scene in which you see a farm-house, used by the Germans as an observation post, crashed through by a tank as if it were matchwood made for a Hollywood set. You see the German dead ; the bodies are searched, and out of the pockets come photographs of Nazi atrocities. Or you see a dead German sprawling across a burning tank, his signet ring with its Swastika plainly visible. The flames are just beginning to catch his sleeve, and the succinct comment is : "No, Nazi, we are not sorry for you !" One shot gave the hushed audience peculiar satisfaction. A village being recaptured and freed from the Germans, the inhabitants gave up to their rescuers one of their number who had acted as a traitor and betrayed to the invaders the habitat of their secret stores of food. Presently one saw this scoundrel led to summary trial and--this was what gave the house such satisfaction--one watched him being severely set about with brooms and mops by all the old women of the village. One saw calmer scenes, too, such as the adoption of a three-year-old little girl, father killed and mother taken into slavery. One saw dawn rise over Leningrad and dusk fall on that city at close of day. I have said above that this film is dignified. I realise now that this word is inadequate. This film is noble. *One Day of War* is not a reconstruction but an actual record of events taken at the moment of their happening. It is almost entirely silent, except for the running commentary. And let it be said that the commentator, Joseph Macleod of the B.B.C., rises to a nobility of utterance which fully lives up to that of the film.

And then, of course, being English, we must proceed to spoil the entire evening with a foolish Government snippet and a wickedly inane

" musical." The snippet showed an encounter between a business damsel and an A.T.S. transport driver seated at the driving-wheel of her truck. Gurgles the business lass : " Darling, I had no idea the A.T.S. uniform could look so marvellous. I envy you, my sweet ! " But the patriotic driver seizes her cue and retorts : " In that case, angel, why not try wearing one yourself ? " And we are to assume that yet another valiant girlie will presently be winning the war for us. The " musical," entitled *Orchestra Wives*, was partly about the quarrels between jazz players and their helpmeets, partly about the ecstasy of a young girl confronted with an oily dago vomiting his vulgar soul into a trombone. In no other country would this appalling rubbish have been bracketed with the Russian film. Disgusted, I got up and left.

## 84. Fun and Games

June 2, 1943.

THERE WAS A SOUND OF RIBALDRY by day. The laughter was heard in the cosy little Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer private theatre. It was even rumoured that the storm of merriment swept from its august moorings the eyeglass of my old friend Mervyn McPherson. Were I in gayer mood I should call this article " Mervyn's Monocle." But I am sad. One of my favourite passages in Marlowe is the one in which Tamburlaine, parading his sons before him, addresses them as follows, viz., and to wit :

But now, my boys, leave off and list to me,  
That mean to teach you rudiments of war;  
I'll have you learn to sleep upon the ground,  
March in your armour through watery sens,  
Sustam the scorching heat and freezing cold,  
Hunger and thirst, right adjuncts of the war,  
And after this to scale a castle wall,  
Besiege a fort, to undermine a town,  
And make whole cities caper in the air.

To illustrate this seems to be the end of every film director's desire, even if it means wading through oceans of twaddle to arrive at it.

The plot of *Assignment in Brittany* (Empire) is unbelievable nonsense. I use the words in their strictest connotation. The plot does not make

sense, and I cannot believe in it. One Captain Metard, a loyal Frenchman, is ordered to discover the whereabouts of a Nazi submarine base on the coast of Brittany which the British Admiralty has not been able to locate. It happens that Metard has met one Bertrand Corlay, a wounded French soldier, who comes from a town in Brittany. It is arranged, therefore, that Metard shall assume Corlay's identity, go to his old home, and take in his mother, sweetheart, and village cronies. This, my dear Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, is what I call bosh. Why, the man's hands, voice, walk, tricks of speech—everything would betray him. He wouldn't know his way about the house, or whether the bathroom was upstairs or in the garden ! And, of course, there is a lot of love-making ; for it seems that whereas little Anne Pinot, his fiancée, didn't like Corlay, she is nuts on Corlay's impersonator. Contrariwise, the village enchantress Elise—the absence of a surname guarantees her impropriety—who used to be terribly keen on Corlay, can't abide Metard. In the end Metard discovers the submarine base, and after some elaborate séances of torture, walks out on his captors and wirelesses Whitehall. (One of these days we shall see a film in which the unarmed hero does not elude, outwit, and overthrow a Nazi armed guard fifty times his number, to say nothing of stone walls and steel doors.) Whitehall wires back : "O.K. Commandos will be with you 16.00 hours to-morrow." They are. City-capering starts 16.05 hours and at 16.35 hours Metard, Corlay, and little Miss Pinot are seen on board a destroyer cheek by jowl with a Welsh—I beg Wales's pardon—with a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayerish chorus of sailors singing the "Marseillaise" to a background of capering town-halls and gasometers. Quel bunk !

I made an unhappy mistake at the trade show of *Desperadoes* (Gaumont, Haymarket, and Marble Arch Pavilion). Not being assisted at the moment by that invaluable *aide-mémoire* Synopsis, I watched the curtains part on what I thought was, and continued to believe to be, a superb burlesque of an old-fashioned "Western." The film was in Technicolor, and surely it was an intentional bit of fun on the part of the photographer which made all the people look like figures reflected in spoons or those unflattering mirrors one still sees, I believe, in fun fairs. This at once set me giggling ; and when every one began to get shot, battered, knocked down, and nearly kicked to death on the slightest provocation, my risibility increased with every minute. The heroine, whom I called "Teaspoon," made such afflicted faces with her head all on one side that I acclaimed Hollywood as the master of parody. The sub-heroine, humorously dubbed "Countess," though I called her

"Tablespoon," wearing clothes like Lady Bracknell's discarded Ascot finery, had only to appear and tears streamed from my eyes. And the men ! One of the heroes, "Saladspoon," I thought to be a breaker-in of horses ; he turned out to be the Sheriff. Another, "Dessertspoon," actually became a breaker-in of horses, but was suspected of being a breaker-in of banks. Too funny ! By this time I placed no bounds on my enjoyment, and shrieked and howled with laughter. There was a trial at which the judge, with an enormous white moustache, walked up and down haranguing the jury, abusing the solicitors, and insulting the public ; finally he erected with his own hands the shed in which the condemned prisoners were to be hanged and invited said prisoners—who were actually looking at it through their prison bars—to admire the skill with which he had arranged the drop. By this time tears were dripping on to my coat faster than the Arabian trees let fall their medicinal gum. Then I revelled in an astounding procession of lop-sided bankers, crooked crooks, wry-faced bravos, and awry-fashioned bronchos. Glorious ! And a scene of fighting in a saloon where everything and everybody were smashed, where the glasses hurtled and the bottles flew and the timber split and the rafters rifted. I nearly started clapping, it was so good. And the way the heroes got into gaol for crimes they didn't commit and got out of it again after crimes they did—all the splendid confounding of the innocence of the guilty with the guiltiness of the innocent—'twas, I assure you, side-splitting !

And then the dreadful thing occurred. Suddenly I realised that the world was not laughing with me—I was laughing alone ! *Desperadoes* wasn't a burlesque at all ! It was supposed to be a real story, the fight in the saloon a serious life-and-death fight, the trial a perfectly legal one. Hastily I procured the Synopsis, and it was there that I read that "the characters and incidents portrayed and the names used therein are fictitious." Abashed, I withdrew.

## 85. Funny and Not so Funny

June 30, 1943.

THE LONDON PAVILION IS ANOTHER of those picture houses which is apparently without regard for the ear-drums of its patrons. The opening of *They Got Me Covered*, the new Bob Hope-Dorothy Lamour

picture, was ear-splitting. Each and every character was made by the excessive amplification to shout and yell as though the person within two yards of him were standing on the other side of a crevasse in the middle of an Alpine avalanche. The women's voices, being shriller, were even worse. They were like railway engines shrieking at each other across the wastes of Euston. Can nothing be done about this? Of course it can. Then why isn't it? At one time I thought I should have to leave. This would have been a pity, because the film turned out to be really amusing nonsense. Nobody resents more than I do being asked to take nonsense seriously; nobody welcomes nonsense more than I do when a film obviously starts on the nonsensical plane and continues on that plane to the end. In the present story Bob Hope is foreign correspondent to the American Amalgamated News. On the day of the German invasion of Russia he wires the newspaper that it is eight to five against there being any invasion, having mistaken the marching troops for a ceremonial parade. The rest of the story, which happens alternately in Gestapo headquarters, a beauty parlour, and a girls' apartment house, hardly matters. Nearly all of it is enormously funny with a considerable infusion of wit, and Bob wanders through it like a slightly bewildered, well-intentioned, blundering bison. I rather felt that Dorothy Lamour, who partners him, ought to be pursued by a gorilla or something. But perhaps I was thinking of some other actress.

Many people are not quite happy about the, I am willing to believe, subconscious sympathy with the Nazis that is beginning to show in some of our plays and films. Was it not in *49th Parallel* that Eric Portman, playing the part of a Nazi, showed himself no end of a fine fellow? Here is what I wrote in this page at the time of the production of this film (1941):

The thing which makes this picture remarkable is its extraordinary fairness. To show the Nazis as unalloyed gangsters was never good enough. The philosophy of gangsterism is grabbing for one's self. The philosophy of Nazidom is grabbing on behalf of a nation, which is not less base, but has this difference, that in pursuit of this vile doctrine there is scope in the individual Nazi for loyalty, purpose, tenacity, and unending courage.

Which shows that quite early in the war the trick of crediting the individual Nazi with the qualities of the "hero—for loyalty, purpose, tenacity, and courage are the attributes of heroism—had already been launched and got under way. (Was I simple enough to fall for this? Alas, yes.) Whether Steinbeck meant it or not, the sum total of *The Moon is Down* is the suggestion that we ought to be sorry for Nazis

marooned in the countries they occupy and never knowing whether the next five minutes may not see them stabbed or shot or thrown into some convenient canal. In this book, play, and presumably film, the Nazi Commandant is shown as a decent-minded fellow recognising that the Nazi methods of occupation are wrong and in the long run unavailing, but doing his duty like a good German. "I can think one thing and carry out another," he says. Even our own *Colonel Blimp* shows the popular Anton Walbrook as an entirely delightful and reformed Nazi officer, dreaming about a Germany which has expelled Nazi-ism from its blood. And then that picture of the German officers in their prisoners' camp steeped in the humanities and Schubert. I do not say that this pro-Nazi strain in pictures is deliberate—I say that it is dangerous and that the fact that it is not deliberate makes it more dangerous still.

Now comes *This Land Is Mine* (Tivoli), which is about the occupation of a town somewhere in Europe. Here, again, the Commandant (Walter Slezak) turns out to be a charming fellow quite willing to overlook any amount of anti-Nazi action if he can maintain peace. A train taking a consignment of food to Germany is wrecked. Now this, in the normal course of events, would lead to the taking of hostages and the subsequent shooting of them unless whoever committed the outrage is discovered or gives himself up. But such shooting, argues the Commandant, who appears to be first cousin to Steinbeck's Colonel Lanser, will only lead to another outrage, which will mean taking and shooting a hundred hostages—which, again, will be followed by a third outrage, and so on and so forth. Wherefore he proposes to call the first affair an accident and say no more about it. I would like to call the attention of this film's makers to the fact that any Nazi commandant condoning outrages by pretending to regard them as accidents would be, at once removed. Our film conveniently overlooks this. Presently a bomb is thrown, Nazi soldiers are killed, and later an ammunition train is blown up, which forces the Commandant to action. The local assistant schoolmaster (Charles Laughton) finds himself involved to the extent of being accused of the murder of a local railway official (George Sanders), who is a tool of the Nazis. There is a great deal in the picture about this gentleman, and also about the Mayor (Thurston Hall), both of whom make out the best possible case for the quislings. This reinforces my statement that the film has disconcerting tendencies. In reality the railway official has committed suicide owing to a guilty conscience. In the end the schoolmaster is put on trial and is permitted to deliver a long-winded speech on the meaning of freedom, which oration the

authorities would stop after two minutes. Do the makers of this film really believe that in an occupied town the Germans are going to allow a man on trial to develop an intricate philosophical tirade on behalf of liberty, and against the conqueror's oppression? This is what happens in the present film. Let me repeat that I distrust that portraiture which shows the Nazi as a man in whose mouth butter has not even a tendency to melt.

Quite apart from its political implications I regard this film as dull, prolix, and unamusing. It ends with Laughton reading the American Bill of Rights to his pupils. I fear Charles's habit of reading bits of Magna Charta and such-like manifestoes is growing on him; some one should break him off it. At the same time it is the best thing he does in the present performance, which for the most part is boring, unattractive, and even unappetising.

## 86. *Half a Masterpiece*

October 6, 1943.

"EXPRESSIONISM" IN THE THEATRE IS, I am glad to say, dying. The expressionist producer gloried in posing his characters on precarious step-ladders, straddled athwart beams and squatting on the apices of triangles—so long as these characters were thus perched and poised the matter of their jabbering was immaterial. I have long thought that if ever I were to produce "King Lear," I should arrange for the nozzle of the hosepipe providing the storm to be in full view of the audience, and the heath covered with a tarpaulin such as circus clowns use for a water act. But alas, the moment for this nonsense has gone by: expressionism is not merely dying. It is dead. Expressionism, or montage, or whatever they call it in the films, is still very much alive and kicking. It was a dire day for the pictures when Lubitsch or Hitchcock or somebody discovered that the scream of a woman was exactly like the scream of a train entering a tunnel. At once the high-brow director set about fusing the two, and what began as woman ended as tunnel. And he ceased to care why the woman was screaming or where the train was going; the fusion was all that troubled *him*. And so it has gone on. Say that you want to indicate a boy growing up into manhood. You do this by showing a pair of knees, stockings, and thick schoolboy shoes.

kicking a pebble along the road. This fades into grown-up trousers, and manly feet kicking a similar pebble along the same road. And the director is again totally indifferent to what has happened to the young man in the meantime.

It is this kind of thing which has made our higher-browed critics hail *King's Row* (Warner and Regal) as getting on for a masterpiece. "The presentation and development of the characters and their lives are achieved by means native to the cinema. A face half-seen behind a twitching lace curtain and a child calling up the staircase of a voiceless house ; the hypodermic needle lying by the bedroom jug." This pulls me up short. It is the sight of this hypodermic needle which tells a son (a) that his mother has cancer, (b) that she has to have morphia, and (c) that she has only a fortnight to live. What of it, do you ask ? Merely that the young man is not only living with his mother and having her daily and hourly under his observation, but that he is also a medical student advanced to the point when he is about to go to Vienna to specialise in psychiatry ! As a dramatic critic I should point out that a medical student who doesn't know a dying mother when he sees one is a measureless ass and can only do measureless harm when he becomes what the soldiers call a "trick cyclist." Here, perhaps, is the place to record a cynical remark I heard the other day : "Psychiatry, my dear fellow ? Psychiatry is the science which proves that what makes a man a criminal is anything and everything except the criminal instinct !" But to go back to the film. As a dramatic critic I should have diagnosed the medical student as a fool. As a cinema critic I should—nay, must—go into raptures over a needle.

Now I have a dreadful confession to make. This is that I left the picture house three-quarters of the way through the film ! And I will explain why. *King's Row* begins brilliantly with the story of a doctor, not unlike Jane Eyre's Mr Rochester, saddled with a lunatic wife. There is also a daughter, whom the doctor keeps secluded, and with whom the young medical student, coming to read with the doctor, falls in love—they have been boy-and-girl sweethearts—although he only sees her every few weeks or even months. The first half-hour of this picture has extraordinary tension and pathos, and I was at least ten times more absorbed than I was at the old Orson Welles fudge of *When is a Sledge Not a Sledge* ? Then came one of the, to me, greatest surprises I have experienced at the pictures—the doctor shot his daughter and committed suicide ! Whereupon I settled myself most firmly in my seat, holding that the plot must develop along *Berkeley Square* lines. Up

to this point the acting of Claude Rains, Robert Cummings, and Betty Field had been very fine. Three-quarters of an hour then passed in which we heard not one word of the medical student—who had gone to Vienna to study—the doctor, or his daughter. Instead, the film developed into a long, mussy yarn about the medical student's chum, the local Lothario, and how he took down-town girls buggy-riding to the distress of the little up-town girl who was in love with him. Now I don't mind boring and uninteresting films ; I am inured to them, and if I get off with two of this sort a week, consider myself lucky. But to be bored and uninterested after expectation has been raised to the highest point is just too much, and I won't stand—I mean sit—for it. Next morning I discovered from the papers that all I had missed was a railway accident, after which Lothario had had both legs unnecessarily amputated by the up-town girl's father, a sadistic doctor, and was thereby reduced to such a state of melancholy that the young psychiatrist had to return from Vienna in order to restore his friend's waning morale by reading Henley's "Invictus" at him.

When doctors differ, who shall decide ? And what is the pupil to think who is reading medicine with both ? As I sat on Sunday last at the feet of my two mistresses I was horrified to find them pointing in different directions ! My dear Dilys opined : "It is by the most delicate choice of detail and of moment that the currents of disappointment, bitterness, ferocity, and despair flowing beneath the surface of trivial existence are made clear to us, just as they are made clear at last to the central and innocent figure." Whereas my not less revered Lejeune bluntly said she never wanted to see *King's Row* again ! In other words, both these fine critics had got the needle, but in different senses. In my own clumsy way I venture to think that both were right, that the film is half masterpiece and half junk.

*Stage Door Canteen* (Odeon) has been running long enough to permit one to say what one really thinks about it. In my view it is a concatenation of drivel in which forty-seven film stars and Yehudi Menuhin appear. Gracie Fields sings two indifferent songs indifferently, Menuhin performs two pieces, neither of which was written for the violin, and a great many people I have never seen or heard of behave as though they were world celebrities. I whiled away the tedium by trying to decide which of the six dance bands reached the lowest depths of sub-normality. Quickly eliminating the Negro and Cuban bands which, after all, were performing their native music, I thought Benny Goodman's lot won the Humiliation Stakes hands down.

## 87. Concerning Twaddle

February 2, 1944.

SOMEbody ASKING CHARLES THE SECOND if he could explain why a particularly foolish preacher should be so popular with his audience, that most sensible of monarchs replied : " I suppose his nonsense suits their nonsense." Did I call Charles II our most sensible ruler ? Yes, for I suppose his notion of a sensible way of living was very much the same as mine. Application of the Merry Monarch's method of reasoning would make the way of the film critic a good deal easier. Nine-tenths of films are twaddle, and it is no use pretending they are not. The point is whether the film producer's kind of twaddle agrees with the critic's kind of twaddle.

I have been prompted to the foregoing by this week's two films, both twaddlesome to the *n*th degree. I liked one almost as much as I disliked the other, except that that would not have been possible. Here, again, a deep philosophical truth is involved, a truth first enunciated by the late Allan Monkhouse. This is that it is not so good to win as it is bad to lose—a principle which prevails on the battle-field as well as at the bridge table. The golfer who has won his match on the last green has forgotten all about it before he has reached the club-house ; the man who has lost is still rankling while trying to say in his ordinary voice : " That's enough soda, thank you." Applying all this to the cinema, I would say that it is not possible to like a good film as much as one dislikes a bad film. In other words, one's admiration for one's own twaddle is never on the level with one's contempt for the other fellow's twaddle. To cut the cackle, I liked *Johnny Vagabond* (London Pavilion) very much indeed ; though not so much as I hated *Thousands Cheer* (Empire). All the same, I am perfectly prepared to believe that the contrary view is possible. Many years ago I remember a theatre party at Rules where the guests were John van Druten, Auriol Lee, Komi-sarjevsky, Peggy Ashcroft, Nelson Keys, Maurice Evans, and an actress whose name I always forgot but who plays frumps in Sunday evening shows. Van Druten sprang the new theory that the business of the playwright is to mirror the novel, whereupon Auriol said : " Hush,

darling!" Van Druten, ostensibly modelling *Johnny Vagabond* on a story by Louis Bromfield, has modified his old theory so that it is now the business of the screen to mirror the novel. And, of course, the novel of Charles Dickens, to whose worst work the best of Mr van Druten's so closely approximates.

Consider the lay-out, as outrageously sentimental as it is infeasible. In some one-horse American town back in 1906 one Vinnie McLeod, the elderly widow of the proprietor of a newspaper called the "Star and Banner," still carries on with the aid of a staff of five, although she has to keep the paper going by pawning her drawing-room candlesticks! On which, with the usual Dickens touch, Ikey Moses Cheeryble advances more than they would fetch if sold outright. Because Vinnie once met Dickens, and because she finds a tramp reading "Pickwick," she must needs engage the young fellow, who hasn't had a wash for weeks, to remodel her newspaper and launch an attack against the forces of vice and graft, represented by the figure of Dougherty, the owner of the rival and prosperous newspaper. Now it seems that this one-horse town runs to a brothel, and a pretty good brothel if, as Damon Runyon would say, you care for brothels. And there is a wonderful picture of Gashouse Mary (Marjorie Main—a superb performance), who is not in the least like Miss Missouri Martin, the proprietress of the Sixteen Hundred Club. It was Miss Missouri Martin who told Miss Billy Perry that if a guy loves a doll he will prove it with diamonds. "Miss Missouri Martin has many diamonds herself, though how any guy can ever get himself heated up enough about Miss Missouri Martin to give her diamonds is more than I can see." It was Miss Martin who put the blast on Miss Perry "for chasing a two-handed spender such as Dave the Dude out of the joint." Gashouse Mary would not have chased anybody out of her joint except, maybe, a guy who wanted to get fresh with the girls. How this kind of establishment can pay its way and remain entirely respectable is one of those mysteries which even proper Hollywood has not deigned to solve.

Well, there is your plot nicely started. After this there is a little mild gangsterism, with a good fight on the back seat of a buggy drawn by a pair of horses running away for no reason. Which brings me to the *pièce de résistance*. This is one of those torchlight processions with placards, bands, and stuffed figures dangling from gibbets, which every one-horse American town seems to be able to organise at a minute's notice, though it must take Hollywood several weeks. In the end vice is defeated, Vinnie's newspaper is left in possession of the field, and there

is a scene between the tramp and his patroness which is horribly reminiscent of Barrie in his drooling *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* vein. In the end the tramp, who is none other than James Cagney, whispers to Vinnie (Grace George) that she is his girl and can look forward to occasional visits ; after which the tears gather in Vinnie's eyes, now grown to the size of blackcurrant tarts. And the unseen band resumes Balfé's "When Other Lips and Other Hearts" with which it has been sickening us all the morning, and the curtains come slowly together. After the Press view there was a moment's silence, followed by a noise which was either that of American soldiers overcome by emotion or high-brow critics overtaken by nausea. For myself, I left the theatre happily poised between the two.

About the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture I find it difficult to say anything except that its twaddle is not my kind of twaddle. It seems to suffer from Hollywood's old delusion that the war, whether against Germany or Japan, exists merely for the purpose of enabling young American huskies to put on uniform and act as chorus to some crooning nitwit. The present film consists of alternate slabs of patriotism and necking, both in Technicolor. I am indebted to Synopsis for the story, which begins as follows :

Kathryn Jones gives up a concert career to keep house at an Army camp for her father, the colonel, who has been separated for thirteen years from her mother. Kathryn hopes that, through her father, she can reunite her estranged parents. At the station where she entrains for the Army camp, every one is saying good-bye to some one—all except a lonely soldier (Eddie Marsh). He thinks he should kiss some one, since it seems to be a local custom, so he kisses Miss Jones ! Later, at camp, he learns he has kissed the colonel's daughter ! They don't get on so well because she is quite independent, whereas he is egotistical and dictatorial. He decides, to ease his inner pain, to join the air corps. Friends suggest he might accomplish this by getting "in good" with the colonel. To this, he adds his own touch : he becomes extremely nice to Kathryn ; she'll help him, he thinks. This contact has repercussions—they fall in love.

And then it turns out that the soldier is a trapeze artist ; wherefore the young man breaks camp, rejoins his troupe, gives an aerial performance for the benefit of Miss Jones. He is court-martialled and, in the words of Synopsis, "The colonel comes in with the news that he and his outfit have been ordered overseas. Every one is kissing some one again, on the station platform. It's all right, this time, for Eddie." Well, if that's the sort of twaddle you like, you'll like this very much. *Thousands Cheer* has twenty-three stars and three bands. And it

is compèred by Mickey Rooney whose performance, as an actor, is steadily getting worse and worse.

## 88. *I Turn High-brow*

February 9, 1944.

I HAVE BECOME A CONVERT, or rather, I have converted myself. Time was when I held that the proper business of the film was to provide puerilities for the puerile, that the greater the nonsense the more the cinema was fulfilling its unique function. And now I have been paid in my own coin. I have seen a picture so abjectly, excruciatingly silly that henceforward I renounce and abjure the infantile theory. Meekly I swear to take my cinematic vows as a humble brother of the Order of Orson Welles. Listen now to the plain unvarnished tale of the film that brought about this momentous decision. This production of George Waggener—the extra “g” and what worlds away, as Browning so nearly said—this highly elaborated, super-varnished masterpiece of imbecility was entitled *Phantom of the Opera* (Odeon). To begin with, the plot was based on the assumption that orchestral players fall in love with opera singers ; which, of course, is something out of nature. I once had a friend who was a very talented amateur violinist. Turning professional, he obtained a job in the orchestra at a famous opera-house, and at his first performance heard to his astonishment some world-renowned *prima donna* prolong her death scene with interminable roulades and cadenzas, thereby plunging the audience into unimaginable ecstasies. But not so the player who shared my friend’s desk. His brow grew darker and darker, and finally he was heard to murmur : “ Doesn’t the — — know the pubs shut at eleven ? ” Perhaps this film’s fiddler was not of the drinking persuasion. Or perhaps it may be urged in Erique Claudin’s favour that he was in love, not with La Biancarolli, the star of the Paris Opera, but with Christine Dubois, a member of the chorus and the star’s understudy. Indeed, Claudin was so much enamoured that he spent all his money paying for singing lessons for Christine, who apparently thought she was being coached by the great Signor Ferretti *pour ses beaux yeux*, or the shape of her glottis, or something. But then Claudin was an extraordinary fellow altogether,

since when he took up composing he employed the piano concerto as a medium for expression, a thing by no means usual with violinists. Owing to some obscure malady Erique then lost the use of his left hand, whereby he was dismissed from the Opera with a free pass for a pension ! The landlady clamouring for money and the singing master making the same soulless request, Claudin conceived the notion of selling, not his piano, but his piano concerto, to Pleyel the music publisher, who promptly proceeded to lose the manuscript ! Or so he told Claudin who, hearing his principal theme being played in an adjoining room, not unnaturally supposed that Pleyel had pirated the piece in some anachronistic Tin Pan Alley manner. At this point I pause to enable the printer to replenish his stock of exclamation marks. Are we ready? Very well, then. The strumming pianist was none other than the Abbé Liszt ! ! ! ! ! Whereupon Claudin throttled Pleyel—a detail not mentioned in Grove—and received in his face the contents of a dish of sulphuric acid which Pleyel's mistress was conveniently carrying. Screaming with pain, the ex-violinist burst out into the miraculously empty street and, in spite of being blinded, located a manhole in the pavement outside the Opera, took off the lid, and lowered himself into the catacombs beneath Charles Garnier's masterpiece.

In the meantime the oddest things had been happening above stairs. We had heard an opera, entitled "Amour et Gloire," made apparently out of Chopin's A major Polonaise, C sharp minor Valse, and E flat Nocturne, and the setting of which was obviously borrowed from "Rigoletto." Now Claudin got to work. Wearing a mask, he drugged the star so that Christine could deputise in a new opera about a masked ball, the music of which, to our untutored ear, seemed to consist entirely of Tschaikowsky's Fourth Symphony. The enraged *prima donna* agreeing to overlook the incident of the drugging (from which she miraculously recovered in less than the span of an aria) and promising to appear as usual on the following evening, she became, as Lorelei would say, murdered. But the tale of absurdity grows tedious. Let me come to the *dénouement*. Transferring himself from the catacombs to the opera-house ceiling, Claudin, incensed because some other under-study had been preferred to Christine, severed the chain of the grand chandelier, causing it to fall among the crowded stalls, but apparently without doing any harm to anybody. Suspecting Claudin, the police had the admirable notion that the performance of his concerto might entice the violinist to show himself, as cats may be lured by a saucer of milk. Let the Abbé Liszt come forward; which that venerable figure

did, to a house whence all had fled except, of course, the orchestra. Down below in the catacombs Claudin heard the opening chords of his concerto. . . . Then somebody fired a shot and the masonry fell in, killing Claudin but doing no harm to Christine.

The reader will agree that the foregoing events were, shall I say, bogglesome? But there was one thing which perplexed me utterly, and which I am still unable to understand. This is: Where was Jeanette Macdonald? How she would have loved giving her famous *coloratura* performance suspended from the flies, hanging on to the drop curtain, taking headers into the sewers which apparently pursue through the catacombs the muddy tenor of their way. Her substitutes, Jane Farrar and Susanna Foster, do very well, but I miss my Jeanette. As for the preposterous Claudin, I can only suppose that Claude Rains, a genuine and sincere artist, must have had some secret reason for lending his support to anything so completely idiotic. Nelson Eddy? He is around and about. And that, as far as I am concerned, is the end of the popular film for me. Henceforth let there be high-browism at its dorest. Let me mistake sledges for tea-trays. Steep me in dull sagas shrouded in so much gloom that one cannot tell Mr Rochester from Citizen Kane. Henceforth I propose to fill this page with essays of such intellectuality that our lady critics, putting their pretty heads together, will not have the vaguest notion what I am talking about.

## 89. A Great Film

March 1, 1944.

THIS WEEK YOUR FILM CRITIC PROPOSES to divagate—a thing he rarely permits himself. You have doubtless noted, dear reader of the "Tatler," how among all the film critics your James is the one who sticks closest to the business in hand. Have you not seen him pursue the plot of each and every film into the last of its inane and cretinous ramifications? What other critic will describe with such meticulous particularity the happenings in *Hellzapoppin* or the outlay of a drama enacted by Olsen and Johnson? Your critic takes no credit for this; the fact that a film is bad means that it bristles with critical opportunity. Whereas about the perfect film there is little to be said except that it is

perfect. Take, for example, the new Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer picture, *Madame Curie* (Empire). This relates how one Marie Skłodowska, a Polish girl scientist, meets Pierre Curie. How, through a key getting itself photographed in a dark and closed drawer, she hits upon the notion of a new element. How she labours month after month and year after year to turn the notion into a certainty. How, on the eve of the announcement of the world discovery, Curie is killed. And how Madame Curie carries on the double work. What is there to say about this? Nothing, except that it makes a perfect film. Therefore your critic divagates.

Some time ago I cut the following out of my daily paper :

A young Indian seaman refused to be cross-examined by a woman barrister at Liverpool Assizes yesterday. "Mind your own business, I good boy. I no talk to girls," he said. The barrister tried again, but the Indian would not answer her questions, persisting that he "did not talk to girls." "You are a good boy," said Mr Justice Singleton, "but this lady is a good girl. You must answer her questions." "Oh! she good girl," said the Indian. "Very well, I answer questions."

I think the Indian was right the first time. The woman barrister looks and is ridiculous, and has been so since Portia. Neither should the sex sit on juries ; no woman will believe that a witness wearing the wrong clothes can be giving the right evidence. In the arts, feminine activity should be strictly circumscribed. Novel-writing, yes ; play-writing, no. Acting, singing, dancing, yes ; painting, no. Conductor on a bus, yes ; on a concert platform, no. As for composing, the idea is as ludicrous as to suppose women capable of writing epic poetry. As executants, a little harp-playing, the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, and the easier piano concertos of Mozart. I approve of women as nurses, governesses, cooks, laundresses, contortionists, typists. I disapprove of them as doctors, dentists, lawyers, engine-drivers, boatswains, and, of course, wine butlers. I dined recently at a famous club where the male servants had gone to the war and were replaced by females. Our host, at the end of a very good meal, offered us as a great treat a bottle of the club's very best Port. The waitress brought this in with as much reverence as she would have given to a bottle of ginger beer. "Why don't you give it a 'good shaking ?'" asked my host ironically. "I've already done that, sir," said the waitress. No, there are some things about which women know nothing. And no woman should be a scientist. Because science demands two things : first, mind ; and second, exact mind. And then there is that little matter of sex. Not for

nothing did Goethe write that last line of "Faust"—the line about Das Ewig-Weibliche. Goethe's point was that the Eternal Feminine lifts Man up ; what he failed to see was that it is exactly this quality, which drags Woman down. I remember a scene in a play by Lord Dunsany, in which the Queen of the Amazons falls in love with her enemy Alexander, to whom she makes the following proposal : "Come up against me, my lord, with horses, for my women cannot stand up against horses. You will defeat my army and I shall be your prisoner." The queen was a true woman, since in comparison with her enjoyment of Alexander the betrayal of the army which trusted her was less than nothing.

I believe there are great explorers who will persist with their expedition in spite of the knowledge that the moment their back is turned their wives will be getting some smirking cavalier to escort them to Brighton. But the lady explorer is not yet born who could continue on her expedition knowing that she was leaving a husband in the clutches of "that woman." I can believe in some heroic female who has been well and truly bitten by the scientific bug continuing to battle against discouragement and the loss of her partner. But let that partner take another to his bosom, and the only discovery your female will be interested in is the discovery of something which smarts more than vitriol. No, I do not believe in women scientists any more than I believe in a woman Astronomer-Royal. The she-astronomer does not exist who, even if Saturn and Neptune were in collision, would not take her eye from the telescope if her best friend came in wearing a new hat. Madame Curie is an exception to the foregoing. She was a heroine of the Charles Morgan Do-You-Realise-My-Love-That-The-Angles-At-The-Base-Of-An-Isosceles-Triangle-Are-Equal type. She was everything all women abhor and most men dislike. She had none of that feminine vacillation which alternately delights and infuriates. She was logical. She was single-minded. And she makes a grand film.

I am inclined to think that the time has come to recognise Greer Garson as the next best film actress to Bette Davis ; always excepting eight-or-nine-year-old Margaret O'Brien, who is as good as the two of them together ! And while we are about it, why not recognise Walter Pidgeon as our leading film actor ? At least I know nobody who can do nothing with such prodigious effect. He must be Mr Ivor Brown's pattern and model for a great actor. But the cast is stiff with celebrities—Henry Travers, Albert Bassermann, Aubrey Smith, May

Whitty. The film runs two hours and four minutes, and is not a second too long. It is in places deeply moving, and there are two moments, first, when radium is guessed at, and second, when it begins to glow, which are exciting enough to lift one out of one's seat. There is not a false note anywhere and, indeed, the film is perfect except for one tiny but important detail. Madame Curie has complained of the burning of the tips of her fingers. "We must give up our experiments," says her husband. "Has not the doctor warned you that there is a danger of cancer?" Madame utters whatever is the French for Pooh! Whereupon her husband offers her every inducement he can think of, a useful life in another sphere, loss of children, week-ends in the country . . . But Madame snaps her poor burnt fingers at all this. She must go on with her work at whatever risk. "What is wrong here?" asks the reader. Simply that the lady was not put to the final test—the test which no woman has ever been known to resist. Curie should have offered his wife whatever in the 'nineties was the equivalent of a coat of silverblu mink.

## 90. *Shaw, Zola, and Bernadette*

April 5, 1944.

WHAT A PITY that G. B. S. is not fifty years younger and criticising films for the old "Saturday Review," as he would undoubtedly have done if they had existed in his day. With what ferocity would he have fallen upon *The Song of Bernadette* (New Gallery)! How he would have torn to shreds the thin fabric of this picture's argument! "The mightiest emotional impact the screen has ever known," said the programme. And I thought of a jar in the History of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. All that container to cope with a miserable teaspoonful of the oil of ratiocination. The Shaw of twenty years ago would have done even better. What about a play on the little maid of Lourdes? And what about that Preface? Fifty or sixty pages about another "Galtonic visualiser"? Would not little Bernadette be told how her "hormones had gone astray and left her incurably hyperpituitary or hyperadrenal or hysteroid or epileptoid or anything but asteroid"? One of the Sisters at the convent tells Bernadette that in a more ruthless age she would

have been burnt at the stake for witchcraft. Would it have escaped the author of "St Joan" that on the very day and at the very hour we were listening to this film three women and a man were being tried at the Central Criminal Court under Section 4 of the Witchcraft Act of 1735? Mr Shaw may not now care to write his play about Lourdes; I implore him at least to give us the Preface. What a feast it would be of both reason and unreason! What clever differentiation of hocus from pocus, always provided it was not some super-subtle blending of the two. Just as we read that "Heresy begins with people who are to all appearance better than their neighbours," so we should doubtless be told that faith-healing is born of the desire to heal people more quickly than the laws of normal doctoring permit. And just as Mr Shaw's Inquisitor made out a case for the burning of heretics, so I feel that G. B. S. would establish the necessity for martyrising the world's Bernadettes. I do not insist on this; you never know which way the Shavian cat will jump.

But of one thing I am certain. This is that G.B.S. would not forgo his old trick of writing one thing and meaning another. Take this passage in the Preface to "St Joan": "The penalty of hanging, drawing, and quartering, unmentionable in its details, was abolished so recently that there are men living who have been sentenced to it. We are still flogging criminals, and clamouring for more flogging. Not even the most sensationaly frightful of these atrocities inflicted on its victim the misery, degradation, and conscious waste and loss of life suffered in our modern prisons, especially the model ones, without, as far as I can see, rousing any more compunction than the burning of heretics did in the Middle Ages." Read superficially, this means that things worse than drawing and quartering are going on at Wormwood Scrubs at this very moment. I don't believe it. What Mr Shaw is trying to say is that to inflict on one of our modern, high-toned burglars or sanctimonious embezzlers the misery and sense of degradation of being under restraint, hurts the sensitive fellow much more than that little matter of being drawn and quartered annoyed the brute and clod of the Middle Ages. I can see that scene in which the President of the General Medical Council insists on Bernadette being given twenty years for witch-doctoring on the ground that to hobble about on crutches is to be preferred to the "degradation" of being cured by a quack, and in view of the fact that for every successful unqualified practitioner the world will have to put up with a hundred impostors unpossessed of any kind of skill.

"There is not much point in discussing to what extent one believes

in the miracles of Lourdes, since the film hardly raises the point. The object of the picture is to elicit sympathy for Bernadette. Zola, you remember, did this too, but in a grim and angry way. He was angry with Man for not having the strength to face life without the eternal taradiddle of a paradise. Angry with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, holding this to be the very negation of womanhood "which achieves its mission only through fecundity and the perpetuation of life." One might say that Zola's pity is not without a shred of scorn. At least I read scorn in that almost untranslatable paragraph at the close of that great novel, "Lourdes." I attempt a rough rendering :

Alas, poor stricken humanity, hungry for illusion, who in the weariness of a dying century, having drunk too greedily of science, now holds itself to be abandoned by the doctors of soul and body, and, believing itself to be in deadly danger, turns to the past and demands from Lourdes the miracles of a day that is dead ! Bernadette, the new Messiah of suffering, that touching little figure, was the sacrifice humanity offered up to itself, a victim condemned to solitude and death, from whom was withheld her rightful destiny of woman, wife, and mother, because she had beheld the Holy Virgin.

Zola implies that the sacrifice was not worth while. He had, to put it cynically, no greater opinion of the waters of Lourdes than an earlier philosopher had of the waters of Bath. (Mr Werfel's views ? I am afraid I haven't bothered about Mr Werfel.) The point is that in the cinema Bernadette's sacrifice must be made worth while or the audience would tear the place down. In other words, her story must end in the way Emma Bovary would have liked it to end at the age when her father took her to the convent :

Vivant donc sans jamais sortir de la tiède atmosphère des classes et parmi ces femmes au teint blanc portant des chapelets à croix de cuivre, elle s'assoupit doucement à la langueur mystique qui s'exhale des parfums de l'autel, de la fraîcheur des bénitiers et du rayonnement des cierges. Au lieu de suivre la messe, elle regardait dans son livre les vignettes pieuses bordées d'azur, et elle aimait la brebis malade, le sacré cœur percé de flèches aiguës, ou le pauvre Jésus, qui tombe en marchant sur sa croix.

Bernadette's story begins with one of these *vignettes pieuses*, and it is quite right in the cinema that it should so end.

Little Jennifer Jones gives an admirable performance. But in my view the picture is run off with by Gladys Cooper. Its English spectators have to make two translations—first from French into American and then again into English. Once more I return to the old charge : why use the purely American "fix"—"I'll fix things for you at the convent"

—when the word “arrange” is common to both countries? This film lasts for two hours and three-quarters, which is about two hours too long. There is not nearly enough cerebration, and there is far too much music, all of which is like Humperdinck and water, mostly water. And why must the sound production during the first hour be so ear-piercing? Why must Bernadette’s relatives bawl and shout at one another like sea lions communicating in a gale?

## 91. “*Pygmalion*” Again

April 26, 1944.

MR SHAW’s “PYGMALION,” the film version of which is being revived at the Leicester Square Theatre, is, by common consent, a masterpiece. Very well, then, it is a masterpiece. Admitting this as handsomely and fully as the reader likes, let me not beat about the bush, but say that it is one of those masterpieces which I personally am inclined to honour more in the breach than in the observance. The old play is, of course, a fairy-tale. And, alas, I don’t believe in Mr Shaw’s fairy-tales. In other words, I believe in Tinker Bell but not in Eliza Doolittle. She bores me. But not as much as Higgins and Pickering bore me. The reason Mr Shaw cannot create credible fairies is that he has never been able to create credible human beings. His characters live only on condition that they are character parts like Eliza’s father in this film. Even there Mr Shaw makes occasional mistakes. I don’t mind Doolittle saying he is “up agen middle-class morality”—that is only Mr Shaw’s fun, to which he is just as much entitled as Barrie was to his nonsense. But I do object to Doolittle telling Higgins that if he had had dishonourable intentions towards his daughter he would have demanded fifty pounds instead of five. The London dustman is not so stupid as that. He would have insisted on five pounds a week as long as the affair lasted, and gambled on a longer run than a mere ten weeks.

What is wrong, what has always been wrong with the theatre of Mr Shaw, is its Shawianism. Wrong, of course, from the point of view of actuality, not of wit. G. B. S. himself is made entirely of brain, and we are entitled to ask what a vegetarian, a teetotaller, and a non-smoker can be expected to know of the passion of the glutton, the wine-bibber,

and the tobacco addict? Intellectually, yes; I have no doubt that Mr Shaw can think himself into the body of these gross feeders and huge enjoyers just as, if I were to write a melodrama about the London waterfront, I should doubtless be able to project myself into the skin of some seduced, Thames-secking virgin. But about the passion of love Mr Shaw has never known anything at all. He knows of it intellectually, that it may be poetic, romantic, tender, brutal, and even sadistic. But in his heart of hearts—or rather mind of minds—Mr Shaw has always regarded the two sexes as logical complements; *sine* wedding with *co-sine*, oxygen mating with hydrogen, the toast accommodated with its toast-rack. "Who cares for a slave?" asks Higgins. The average young Englishman regards his girl at first as though she were Helen of Troy or, more probably, Betty Grable. He marries her, and, after a few weeks, or at best, months, discovers that he has got hold of a hen-witted creature capable of nothing but besmearing her nails and having her hair messed about so that it looks like "the white sheet bleaching on the hedge." But he is irrevocably landed with her, so she may as well make herself useful by fetching his pipe and his slippers. Contrariwise I have learned from the films that in America the case is reversed. The average American woman, having discovered that the original of the Clark Gables and Robert Taylors, the young man who attracted her by the squareness of his shoulders or, at any rate, by the square cut of his overcoat, possesses the mentality of a boy of fourteen, decides in a very few weeks, or at best months, of marriage that a husband's job is the masculine equivalent of pipe- and slipper-fetching. In other words, the constant and regular supply of mink coats and diamond bracelets. There is some suggestion at the end of this film that love should be based on mutual respect. It is not, and cannot be, and Mr Shaw tried to get out of the difficulty by writing a play about Ann Whitefield and the Life Force. Unfortunately, Mr Shaw was not content to be biologist alone; being an inveterate sentimentalist, he tried to combine the Life Force with the Mutual Respect theory, not realising that whereas Nature knows all about the one, she knows nothing about the other, which is the invention of Man in his pose of social reformer. They manage these things better in France, where it is recognised that a man shall take to himself one woman for the purpose of raising a family, and another woman from whom children are the last thing he would dream of asking.

But the whole film is riddled with inconsistencies. To take one instance. Commonness of speech is not a matter of pronunciation but of intonation, and nothing can rid man or woman of inherent,

commonness. Other commonesses would have betrayed Eliza in real life—commonness of bearing, of manner, of look, of walk, of the way of listening. But let us grant the teller of the fairy story his premises. Suppose any girl of to-day to be an Eliza abandoned by her Higgins. Would she talk of being thrown back into the gutter? Not on your life. She would realise that the world was open to her—the stage, the screen, the chance to be dance hostess, mannequin, mistress to a rich man, or wife to a poor one. No, readers, I never believed in the play and I don't believe in the film. I don't believe Eliza could have passed muster as a lady—among ladies. No lady talks with an invisible hyphen between each word. And I don't believe in the fine sentiments at the end. Once a flower-girl, always a flower-girl. Having found a mug in Higgins, Eliza would have played him up good and plenty, and being a woman, she would have made her father look like an amateur at the game of extorting money politely.

Now let us be fair to Mr Shaw. The play and the film both date tremendously, and are as remote from the present day as Tom Robertson's "Caste." When Mr Shaw wrote it, women were divided into three classes—the lady, the work-girl, and the suburban lot in-between. You could tell from a glance to which class a girl belonged ; now you can't. It is not that the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skins ; but that they put the same messes on their skins. All that can be said in the matter of class is that no well-bred girl would dream of turning herself into a platinum blonde ; few working girls dream about anything else. As I was coming away from the Leicester Square Theatre I heard an excellently turned-out young woman with glinting locks and purple-slashed mouth say to her cavalier : "If you arst me, that Wendy 'Uller was ever so lovely." No, there is a commonness rampant in the world to-day about which Mr Shaw knows nothing. It is the commonness that Montague had in mind when he wrote of "the vulgarity that is seldom far from the human animal when it has only decorated its animal life and not built an ampler life on it." But then I very much doubt whether the young woman had any notion of what Mr Shaw had been talking about. The word has passed with the thing, and to the average film-goer "lady" is merely the genteel word for female. Compare "charlady." Only the other day one of our rising dramatic critics was telling his readers how, when he was a reporter, he chatted in a public-house bar with the brother of a *lady* executed that morning.

## 92. *A High-brow Goes to War*

*July 12, 1944.*

WRITING SOME TIME in the 'nineties Mr Shaw said : "Whoever has been through the experience of discussing criticism with a thorough, perfect, and entire Ass, has been told that criticism should, above all things, be free from personal feeling." But, of course ! I frankly admit that all my criticisms are personal to me ; meaning that I am totally indifferent as to whether anybody else agrees with them or not. I am willing to allow the same liberty to other critics ; with the reservation that if I find myself agreeing with 90 per cent of their opinions I deem them to be good critics, whereas when I disagree with 90 per cent of their criticisms, which happens often, I know them to be bad critics. The right of free speech carries with it the obligation that such speech shall be for the ultimate benefit of mankind. Obviously a man must not be allowed to get up in Hyde Park and say that he approves of murder, arson, rape, and the like, though he may genuinely think so. Similarly no intellectual should be allowed to print even in the smallest of Bloomsbury's high-brow sheets that Shakespeare was a fool of a playwright. I do not mind his holding so asinine a view. But if he does he must not be a dramatic critic. I would say, further, that a critic who finds himself disliking something approved of by the vast majority of educated people is under the obligation to look into himself to discover the cause of his dislike. Of course it is possible that there is no cause, that the dislike is just there like my distaste for caviare and pimentos. In that case a wise critic will recognise the existence of a Blind Spot. And at once all is well, provided the spot is a spot and nothing more. I should never willingly read another word by a man who wrote Shakespeare down an ass. (Do I hear somebody murmur "G. B. S. and Shakespeare" ? The answer is that Mr Shaw denounced Shakespeare as a donkey on the Shavian plane while hailing him as a stupendous genius on his own.) On the other hand, I should continue to read a critic who professed himself able to see little in Marston and less in Etheridge ; though I should prefer him to put it that Marston and Etheridge were excellent playwrights who happened to be two of his blind spots.

I have now arrived at the point when I can declare with some approach to safety that one of my blind spots in the theatre and cinema is the American playwright Maxwell Anderson. "Winterset"? Alas, I did not see "Winterset," or don't think I did, though I have a recollection of a picture with Burgess Meredith groping about in a fog. This, of course, may have been "Winterset," about which film I have one other curious observation to make. This is that I have asked at least twenty frenzied admirers of Anderson what the play in general and the film in particular was about. And not one of them has been able to give me the vaguest idea. Indeed, I am left with the impression that it was all rather like the duller waterside scenes of "Our Mutual Friend," with lots and lots of high-falutin' philosophy. I daresay I am entirely wrong, and I can only hope that the manager of, say, the Classic Cinema will take steps to lighten my darkness. My dislike of Anderson dates from my visit in 1937 to New York, where everybody was acclaiming his new play, "High Tor." Here are two entries from my diary:

*May 15.* On the way to Atlantic City I read Maxwell Anderson's "High Tor." I must be careful about this one, to which even the "New Yorker" is respectful. It is a poetic fantasy. The place is the top of a mountain, the time the present, the weather Macbeth's, the *dramatis personae* mostly dead, the medium blank verse, and the plot a jumble of Barrie's "Dear Brutus" and "Peter Pan" and Susan Glaspell's "The Verge," except that Anderson's characters have toppled over. I doubt very much whether it is my cup of tea.

*May 19.* In the evening "High Tor" at the Martin Beck Theatre. Defeat with heavy slaughter. The difficulty is to see this play through American eyes, which I suppose one ought to do. As an Englishman I am now certain that it is high fudge interlarded with bleak, totally unfunny humour. I don't boggle about the fantasy part of the play—high-falutin' is the same all the world over. It is the comic interludes which strike me as inexpressibly dreary.

I shall never forget the last act in which two company promoters suspended in steam shovels talked hot air. Then came "The Masque of Kings," which showed how good a playwright Anderson can be when he allows himself to get off his high horse. About this play I wrote that there was "no room for it among Shaftesbury Avenue's tittertraps about twittermice." The next play was some measureless nonsense entitled "Wingless Victory." This was all about one Princess Oparre, an intense young woman who began life prancing about Malay battle-fields and ended it spouting blank verse.

It will be gathered, then, that I went to *The Eve of St Mark* (Odeon) in a mood of complete prejudice. I found the film, which is all about

some soldiers in the Philippines, as to the first half dull and lifeless. Did its lay-out preclude high-falutin' on Anderson's part? Yes, but he got one of the characters to deputise, a boring fellow with an infuriating habit of quoting slabs of poetry in a voice which sent my hands to my ears, so unpleasant was it. About three-quarters way through, the film and the audience woke up simultaneously. Should a handful of soldiers save their skins or stand by a forlorn hope? This was sincere and moving, as also were some telepathic sequences between the hero, his mother, and his sweetheart. If the rest of the film had been on this level this picture would have been a notable one. But it just wasn't. Let me insist that the foregoing is a personal view. I have no doubt that this picture will bamboozle the high-brow critics over here as "High Tor" bamboozled the high-brow critics in New York, who awarded it one of those prizes they are always dishing out for the best play of the year. I challenged them about this at a luncheon party they gave in my honour, saying in my bluff British way that I regarded the play as a fake. Whereupon George Jean Nathan, giving me what I understand is called a "mean" look, said: "Individually, James, we all agree with you. Collectively, when an American dramatist goes high-brow, we think it's up to us to do something about it. For all we know, 'High Tor' may not be the hokum we all hold it to be. But we can't be certain, and it's as well to be on the right side." I don't pretend that these were George's exact words, but I will swear to the gist.

### 93. *Concerning Musicals*

November 22, 1944.

THERE ARE MORNINGS when the sky hangs over me like a pall made of porridge, all my faculties are numb, and the world seems to have lost definition. My breakfast knife turns into india-rubber, and with a pointless fork I stuff my mouth with pieces of omelette made out of Berlin wool. I do not summon the doctor because he would be of no avail. What is the matter with me is that I must immediately after breakfast undergo a "musical." For two hours one will have to endure the water-torture of the Middle Ages, the water being replaced by buckets of tepid whitewash. I will frankly say that in this matter I am not at

one with my kind, for all around me I see eminent critics drinking in the performance with eyes, ears, and mouth, and some who are not critics applauding the wan efforts of Tweetie Twirp as though she were a Gertrude Lawrence or a Beatrice Lillie. I think that is the thing which annoys me most about musicals. I really do see red when I reflect how long and arduous must be the struggle of any player of talent. I see red when I remember Edith Evans's long fight against lack of appreciation, and when I realise the battle that is in front of so brilliant an artist as Sonia Dresdel. I see red when charming little noodles are hailed as terrific geniuses. And I suppose that as long as I am a film critic I shall go on seeing red and die at long last of purple iridescence. But there are musicals and musicals. There is, for example, *A Night at the Opera* (Empire), a revival of the lovely Marx nonsense. Let me say that I spent the ninety-four minutes of this too short film wiping away tears of laughter. "Humour," says Hazlitt, "is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy." What, then, shall we say about all that nature and accident, art and fancy which in their sum are Groucho Marx? There is a heavenly moment when he encounters the three Italian aviators all looking exactly alike and all wearing the same vast, preposterous beard. Groucho shakes his head like a man who has seen a vision and asks: "Is that three men with one beard or is it one man with three beards?" Chico and Harpo are as quaint as ever, there is a magnificently irate performance by Siegfried Rumann, and there is my adored Margaret Dumont who can wear a corsage of diamonds without augmentation of her natural dignity or receive a kick in the stomach without diminishment. They don't make films like this to-day. To which nobody can retort that they never did, for here is the entire and perfect chrysolite.

*A Song to Remember* (New Gallery) is a musical of another kind, starring Merle Oberon as George Sand, Cornel Wilde as Frederick Showpan (thus pronounced by every one in this film), and Paul Muni as Joseph Elsner, Showpan's first music master. Is it permissible, somebody asked me, to take an historical character and weave a farrago of inaccurate absurdities round it? In the case of Chopin I say yes, provided you don't mess up the music. Let it be put to the credit of this film that the music is not messed up. Whether Cornel Wilde is the actual performer or not, I do not know. In either case he atones for not being a very good actor by being either a brilliant pianist or a first-class imitator

of one. Whœver the performer is, he plays Chopin's music a great deal better than Chopin ever played it himself. The poet-dreamer of tradition was only half the real Chopin. Letters of his are in existence showing that under George Sand's very nose Frédéric was writing stuff which cannot be printed owing to what a biographer called his "intempérance de plume allant jusqu'à la dernière grossièreté." Yes, there is enormous fire in compositions like the two Polonaises in A and A flat, the so-called Revolutionary Etude, and the B flat minor Scherzo, to each of which the performer in this film gives the fire, the virtuosity, and the fortissimo of a Horowitz. Whereas it is known that in his more energetic passages Chopin never exceeded a mezzoforte. As one of his biographers writes : "His playing as a whole was unique in its kind, and no traditions of it can remain, for there is no school of Chopin the pianist, for the obvious reason that he could never be regarded as a public player, and his best pupils were nearly all amateurs." I hope I have made the point that Chopin's music could not have been better presented.

The film itself? A jumble of nonsense, of course. To begin with, Showpan is shown as a small child composing that D flat Valse which is now known as his opus 64. In the twinkling of an eye he grows up into a tall, strapping, full-faced young athlete—the actual C. was a short, thin, anaemic-looking wreck—and then apparently spends the next fifteen years or so with George Sand in Majorca. The facts are that C. left Vienna with the intention of visiting London, broke his journey in Paris, and stayed there except for the Majorca episode for the rest of his life. In 1837 his health began to fail and he spent his last twelve years struggling with tuberculosis. The year before he died, *and being hard-up*, he visited England and Scotland, giving private concerts in London and making not very successful appearances in Manchester, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. Is there a film story here? If there is, it must largely be the tale of George Sand who looked like a horse and worked like a horse. There is a well-known tale of this novelist telling Balzac that she had finished her last story at four in the morning. "And then?" asked Honoré. "Then," said Madame, "I started my next." Actually she was a very great artist and a redoubtable thinker—which did not prevent her from being as a woman possessive and ridiculous. She ruined and shortened Chopin's life as she did Alfred de Musset's, and succeeded in being a woman of wit and an unmitigated nuisance and bore. No, there is no film here. And therefore the authors have had recourse to a patriotic Showpan weeping over the soil of his native country in order

to provide funds for the Poles and making fictitious tours of the world's capitals, including Rome, Vienna, Budapest, Amsterdam, and Stockholm, all in glorious Technicolor. And what is Paul Muni doing all this time? Just running off with the entire picture. He gives a first-class performance in the manner of the late Edward Terry, which I suppose means nothing to anybody to-day. That gifted creature, Merle Oberon, is about as much like George Sand as I am like de Musset, but she does very well in a quite impossible part which consists mainly in sitting at a writing-table poised a quill the size of a broom and never writing a word. Anyhow, anyone who can don a top hat with a long flowing skirt shows an amazing courage. As for Cornel Wilde, I can only say that his Showpan is exactly like Haystack Duggeler in Runyon's tale H., if you remember, was in love with Baseball Hattie and, says his creator, "with two ounces of brains, Haystack Duggeler will be the greatest pitcher that ever lives." Cornel must have these two ounces of brains, since if he hasn't we are laughing at Showpan, and somehow we just aren't.

## 94. *Hollywood's Worst Ending*

February 7, 1945.

UP TO THE LAST FIVE MINUTES *The Woman in the Window* (Odeon) was one of the most exciting pictures I had ever seen; so exciting that when my cigar went out I forgot to relight it. And then, right at the end, the whole thing crumpled up in the most miserable way imaginable. I left the theatre wondering what curse is upon Hollywood that it can never achieve a perfect picture. When I got home I looked at Synopsis and I found: "Five minutes before the ending of *The Woman in the Window* in America, the screening was stopped and leading experts challenged to solve the thrilling mystery—not one could give the answer"; and for a damned good reason. There was no mystery to solve!

I don't know how plain a pikestaff may be, but the events in this film were plainer. A professor at a New York college (Edward G. Robinson), leaving his club late one evening and stopping to gaze at the portrait of a woman in a picture-dealer's window, is accosted by

the original of the portrait (Joan Bennett). Would the gentleman like to see some sketches of her by the same artist, her apartment being close at hand? The elderly sucker agrees, presumably having never seen Lavedan's play in which the dissolute Marquis de Priola invites ladies to his house to inspect his collection of almanacs. Presently Edward and Joan are drinking champagne, "quite nicely, of course," as Jean Cadell said in the musical comedy, and then a character who is what Damon Runyon would call a provider appears and tries to throttle the professor.

In the course of the struggle Robinson kills his assailant with the scissors put into his hand by Joan, who hates the provider. The killing being done in self-defence, the obvious thing for the professor to do is, in film language, to "call the cops." But that way notoriety lies, and the professor cannot risk appearance on a front page. So he decides to put the body in his car and dump it in some convenient undergrowth, leaving Joan to tidy up the apartment. Then, since the provider always made his visits in secret and since Joan and the professor are the chanciest of acquaintances who don't know each other's names, there cannot be anything, they hold, to connect either of them with the murder.

But there are more things in American life than are dreamt of in an American professor's philosophy. It is now revealed that the dead man was the millionaire head of an immense corporation whose shareholders were always afraid that their chief's impetuosity would get him into trouble. To guard against this the shareholders engage a young gentleman to "tail" the millionaire, or, as we should say, shadow him without his knowing. And who could be better for the job than an ex-blackmailer and convict? I had not to my knowledge previously seen Dan Duryea, but I congratulate Hollywood on a genuine acquisition. The new-comer's performance of the blackmailer who loses no time in getting to work on Joan, is enchanting throughout. Lamb would have said it would be worth while being blackmailed to "get the idea of" so smooth, so urbane, so *logical* a rogue. Joan at once communicates with the professor whose identity she has by this time discovered, and the professor says: There are only three ways to deal with a blackmailer. The first is to pay him and go on paying him until you're penniless. The second is to call the police. The third is to kill him. If the professor had been less of an innocent he would have known that there are not three ways, but six. The first is to pay the first demand, Sir George Lewis being my authority for the statement that one blackmailer in ten is satisfied with a single bite. The second is to go on

paying. The third is to tell the blackmailer to do his damnedest and even indicate where the telephone is. The fourth is to ring up the police and deny everything. The fifth is to ring up the police and make a clean breast of whatever it is. The sixth is to kill the swine, and tell the police you've killed him. There is a seventh way, but this is wholly foolish and impermissible. This is to kill the blackmailer and try to hide the fact that you have killed him.

Our couple propose to try method No. 7, and to say nothing about it. But the blackmailer knows all about poisoned drinks, and goes on to make his first haul of five "grand" and the millionaire's watch which Joan has incautiously kept. Blackmailer doesn't presume to dictate, but it would really be very nice of Joan if she would have another five "grand" ready for him on the following evening at the same time. He leaves Joan's apartment and straightway the entire film goes to pieces, for the blackmailer falls in with the cops who, it appears, are after him for some other job. Trapped, he starts to shoot it out. But the cops shoot straighter, and since they find the millionaire's watch and the five "grand" on the body, what more natural than the assumption that it was Dan who murdered the millionaire? Which lets our friends out.

At this point Synopsis bids us prepare for a surprise ending and begs those of us who write for the Press not to disclose it. But let me ask: *Where is the mystery?* We have seen who committed the murder and why, and how and why the police are satisfied. What on earth is the riddle? The riddle, of course, is how, having got those delightful players, Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett, into a jam, International Pictures propose to get them out of it without loss of face. I am not surprised that America's experts failed; it could not have occurred to them that anybody would dare to fob an audience off with a conclusion so lame, so impotent, so jejune, and so hackneyed. Nevertheless, I repeat that up to the last few minutes the film held me completely in spite of the fact that Raymond Massey has a rôle which begins promisingly and peters out miserably. I was held by an excellent story and the fact that I get more pleasure from Edward G. Robinson's monkey face than from the splendacious dials of any six of Hollywood's young leading men. As for the blackmailer, I cannot think of an afternoon call which would give me greater pleasure or him less profit.

## 95. *Masterpiece into Rubbish*

March 7, 1945.

SOMETIME IN THE SUMMER OF 1941 Patrick Hamilton wrote what I held then, and still hold, to be a Corker. The title of the book was "Hangover Square." The essence of the story was the disintegration of middle-class riff-raff through drink and excesses, following the example set them by their social betters. This requires time; and in taking for his period the year of Chamberlain's visit to Munich, the author was sticking close to sociological truth. Evelyn Waugh's "Vile Bodies" was set in the later 'twenties, and since it takes some ten years for the non-fashionable parts of London to grow their counterpart of the vicious babies of Mayfair, Hamilton's story was right in date and also in place—this being the dingier purlieus of Earl's Court. The hero—if hero is the word—of the novel was as firmly established in a dozen lines as anything Thackeray could do in a whole book: "He had had Christmas dinner with his aunt, and he had gone out, as he had told her, to 'walk it off.' He wore a light raincoat. He was thirty-four, and had a tall, strong, beefy, ungainly figure. He had a fresh, red complexion and a small moustache. His eyes were big and blue and sad and slightly bloodshot with beer and smoke. He looked as though he had been to an inferior public school and would be pleased to sell you a second-hand car. Just as certain people look unmistakably horsey, bear the stamp of Newmarket, he bore the stamp of Great Portland Street." There are thousands of George Harvey Bones to be met with in the saloon bars of public houses on every day of the week and twice on Sundays. On the fifth page of this book Bone decided to murder Netta Longden. Why? Because he was in love with her and because—to use a common word for a common thing—she was a heartless little tart. The atmosphere of the book was implicit in the title. The characters were all youngish wastrels whose whole employment is drink and whose whole world is bounded by motor cars, road houses, and night clubs. The only weakness of the book was to make George a schizophrenic, for though in cold blood, and when in what he was pleased to call his right mind, he was determined to kill Netta, he had to wait for the schizophrenic fit

to enable him to carry out his resolve. The book contained one scene which instantly marked it out for the cinema. Bone had at last succeeded in persuading Netta to spend a week-end with him at Brighton, on the understanding that the week-end should be companionate. Netta agreed, because she was too cheap to refuse a cheap week-end, and on condition that Bone paid some fifteen pounds' worth of pressing bills and preceded her to Brighton to arrange hotel accommodation. She promised to arrive at 6.5. She turned up one hour later, and by this time Bone was doubly giddy, first with drink and second because, like another and more famous lover, expectation whirled him round. Finally the train arrived and Netta got out, accompanied by one of her admirers and a strange young man. The slightly swaying Bone said : "I didn't know it was going to be a binge." To which Netta replied : "You don't think I could stand you alone, my sweet Bone, do you ?" Yes, it was a mistake to drag in schizophrenia. Netta had it coming to her, anyhow. I remember closing the book and ringing up a film magnate —only to hear that it had already been sold to Hollywood.

The film version at the Tivoli Theatre has almost nothing to do with Hamilton's novel ; only the title and the schizophrenia remain. First the date is put back from 1938 to 1903. Next the *milieu* is changed from the drab streets of Earl's Court to the smart reaches of Chelsea. Bone is no longer a motor salesman but has become a high-class composer (Laird Cregar) with a symphonic background and, to his actual credit, a sonata and part of a piano concerto. What we hear of this has nothing whatever to do with the early years of this century ; it is the purest Bartók with trimmings of Lisztian *chichi*. Netta (Linda Darnell) is no longer a cheap little thing with an eye to the pictures, but an expensive young woman with lovely clothes and some reputation as a *disease*. She is not the sort to go in for cheap week-ends, and her bills, if she has any, run into hundreds. Why, then, does Bone murder her ? Because he is a schizophrenic and has already murdered several other people, and tried to murder Barbara Chapman (Faye Marlowe), the daughter of the distinguished conductor of the Philharmonic Orchestra (Alan Napier). In the novel Bone commits suicide ; in the film he goes mad at two *reprises*. The first attack comes on during the performance of his concerto at an evening party in the conductor's drawing-room, which is large enough to accommodate the entire Philharmonic Orchestra ! "Excuse me," says the composer in the middle of the complicated first movement, "I'm afraid I'm not well." And beckoning to Barbara, he asks her to carry on in his place, which that

accomplished young woman does—and from memory. He then rushes from the room and sets the house on fire, returning to the instrument to finish the concerto by himself, the band having taken flight. Bang ! Crash ! Wallop ! After which the roof falls in, and Dr Middleton (George Sanders), who has been doing a lot of inefficient detective work—at least I take it that a police doctor is inefficient who allows himself to be locked up in a coal-cellar by a man he knows to be mad—tells the conductor and his daughter that it is better so.

The film has one bright moment. This is when Netta, hearing the proposed theme of the slow movement, tries to wheedle Bone into converting it into the kind of rubbish the modern film demands for its theme song, the words proposed by Netta being : “ We’re so near to paradise, we can reach for a star.” The laugh ? This is when Netta pleads : “ It’s only a little theme ; the concerto won’t miss it.” One more thing. Apart from one tiny shot, no drink is consumed, and everybody in the film might be teetotal. The atmosphere of that kind of saloon bar which reeks of yesterday’s fug and fumes is at no time suggested, nor is there any hint anywhere of that hangover which thickens every page of Hamilton’s little masterpiece of frowst. In a word, this is the worst betrayal of a first-class novel that I remember.



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